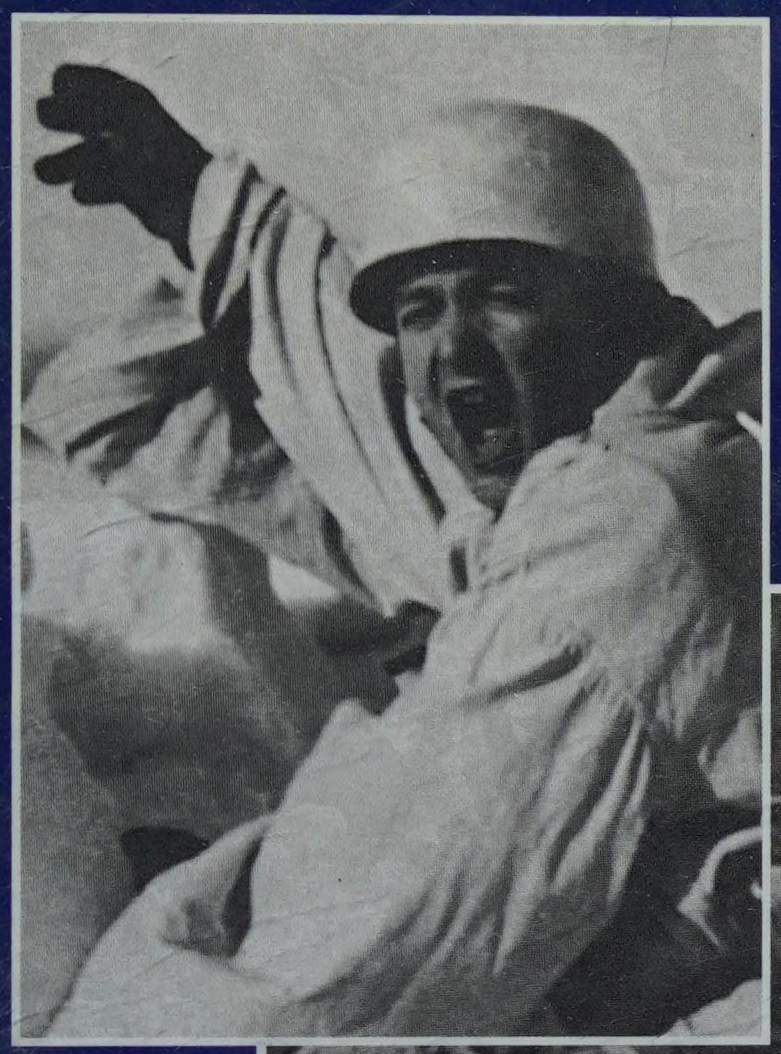
GERMAN PARATROOPERS

The illustrated history of the Fallschirmjäger in World War II

Includes over 200 previously unpublished photographs



General Editor: CHRIS McNAB

GERMAN PARATROOPERS

The illustrated history of the Fallschirmjäger in World War II

Paratroopers as a military force were a creation of the 1930s, made possible through the application of one of the latest technological developments in warfare – air power. Introducing troops into a combat zone by air would, it was believed, not only achieve surprise, but eliminate the costly losses which had been incurred in World War I. From the first, the airborne forces were an elite body set apart from the massed ranks of a country's armed forces, and often tasked with the role of shock assault troops. This concept was most energetically developed in inter-war Germany.

German Paratroopers is a pictorial record of Germany's airborne troops, or Fallschirmjäger, both as they developed as a unit in the run-up to war, and as they were deployed once it had commenced. Rarely-seen images show their spectacular, glider-borne deployments in the Low Countries during the early campaigns of the war in western Europe, their dramatic airdrop and costly seizure of Crete, and their stunning and daring missions at Monte Rotondo and Gran Sasso later in the war.

Ironically, it was their willingness to give every effort unwaveringly even in the grimmest of situations that meant that, throughout most of the war, the paratroopers were seldom used as parachutists. Instead, the paratroopers were prized for their combat abilities, and frequently acted in a 'fire-brigade' role as a roving elite of infantrymen, serving with distinction on the Eastern Front, in North Africa, Italy and resisting the turning tide of the war after D-Day. In every theatre, the paratroopers fought with honour and never gave less than their all.

(continued on back flap)

ISBN 1-85410-726-7 £19.99

NIAGARA FALLS PUBLIC LIBRARY

GERMAN PARATROOPERS

The illustrated history of the Fallschirmjäger *in World War II*

GERMAN PARATROOPERS

The illustrated history of
the Fallschirmjäger *in World War II*

Chris McNab

AURUM PRESS

First published in Great Britain in 2000
by Aurum Press Ltd, 25 Bedford Avenue, London WC1B 3AT
© 2000 Amber Books Ltd

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission from Aurum Press Ltd.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1 85410 726 7

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2000 2001 2002 2003 2004

Editorial and design by
Amber Books Ltd
Bradley's Close
74–77 White Lion Street
London N1 9PF

Editor: Christopher Westhorp
Designer: Floyd Sayers

Printed and bound in Italy
Nuova GEP, Cremona

Page 1: *Making a low-altitude jump into Norway on 9 April 1940.*
Page 2: *A paratrooper armed with an MP40 during the invasion of Crete.*

NIAGARA FALLS PUBLIC LIBRARY
FEB 12 2001

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

THE BIRTH OF THE 'EAGLES' 6

CHAPTER 2

RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING 18

CHAPTER 3

VINDICATION 38

CHAPTER 4

CRETE 56

CHAPTER 5

AFRICA 74

CHAPTER 6

THE EASTERN FRONT 90

CHAPTER 7

ITALY 106

CHAPTER 8

THE WEST 126

CHAPTER 9

SPECIALIST OPERATIONS 144

CHAPTER 10

WEAPONS AND EQUIPMENT 156

BIBLIOGRAPHY 172

INDEX 173

CHAPTER 1

THE BIRTH OF THE 'EAGLES'

By the beginning of World War II Germany had transformed the pre-war idea of the airborne soldier into a reality through an elite body of troops that would add a radical new dimension to battlefield strategy.

Left: *Wearing full parachute harnesses,* Fallschirmjäger *of the 7th* Flieger Division *march through Berlin on the occasion of Hitler's 50th birthday on 20 April 1939.*

Above: *Senior German officers witness an early demonstration in public of the paratroopers' airborne capabilities on 4 October 1936 in Lower Saxony.*

In 1928 six soldiers parachuted from a US bomber aircraft over Kelly Field in Texas and set up a machine-gun on landing. The exercise had been ordered by Brigadier General William ('Billy') Mitchell and served to demonstrate his vision of a revolutionary new tactic of warfare – the airborne assault. Back in October 1918 Mitchell, as commander of the then American Army Air Forces in France, had proposed the then untested use of airborne assault as a method of precipitating an end to World War I. Instead of a standard (and wasteful) frontal attack into the face of the German defences, Mitchell suggested parachuting the entire US 1st Division behind the German lines in the Menin-Roselare region. He believed this would create such instability within the enemy rear

***Above:** Brigadier General 'Billy' Mitchell, a visionary of air warfare. Not only did he expound the tactical use of airborne troop deployment before its time, he also advocated aircraft in anti-shipping roles and separate air units distinct from the army.*

that the whole German front would dissolve. Mitchell's ideas, however, came to nought, mainly because of unfeasible logistics, the Armistice (which came in November 1918, before the proposed operation date of February 1919) and the widespread contempt his views received among fellow military leaders. Even after the 1928 exercise, his idea would not gain full US acceptance until 1940. No such resistance existed elsewhere.

As far back as 1800, officials in France had witnessed possibly the first military-sponsored parachute jump by Andre-Jacques Garnerin. And in April 1889 the American Charles Leroux parachuted 1000m (3300ft) before an audience of senior German officers, since when the idea of deploying airborne troops had taken root across Europe. Following the latter occasion, General Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, who within two years was Germany's chief of the general staff, reported that parachute deployment offered new dimensions of tactical surprise, especially as a method of shock, vertical invasion against otherwise inaccessible enemy headquarters.

Yet von Schlieffen noted that Leroux's nascent technology did not offer the directional control required for military operations. This drawback was resolved by the invention in Italy of the backpack parachute in 1911 and the emergence of dependable aircraft and aviation-related parachute technology early in World War I. Germany's Otto Heinke developed an aviator's parachute which went into full production under the control of Käthe Paulus, Germany's first female parachutist who had been performing demonstration jumps since 1890. In Russia, parachute jumping was a sporting activity prior to World War I. The sport did not obscure the military implications, however, and by 1918 the Red Army had a small unit of parachute troops which would be professional enough by 1930 to take part in army manoeuvres. And in Italy the Italian Army had their own experimental unit by 1927 (Italy also developed the first reliable static-line parachute during the 1920s); by 1938 they had established a formalised parachute company.

Russia's first test operation was a small-scale attack on an 'enemy' headquarters (reminding us of von Schlieffen's words), but in 1935 and 1936 the manoeuvres involved quantities of 1000 parachutists and 5000 airlanded troops who were successfully put down at designated drop zones. The implications for future military operations were profound, and many foreign observers, including the British Army's Colonel Archibald Wavell and several reporters for the German general staff, left these events with new tactical horizons.

The background of the Fallschirmjäger

Even by 1933 Germany had its own small body of parachute-trained combat troops. Witnessing the Russian manoeuvres was certainly a catalyst for further progress, but so were the shifts in European military doctrine following World War I. For most sides involved between 1914 and 1918 the central tactical manoeuvre of massed frontal assaults produced a terrible legacy, as the combination of troops on open ground and the seminal advances in machine-gun technology led to catastrophic casualties. Many tacticians recognised this and looked to design more efficient ways of conducting war.

The British development of the battle tank was one resultant avenue of exploration, and in 1916 on the Somme the rather ponderous mobility of the Mark 1 tanks with their six-pounder guns had a startling psychological effect upon the German defenders. The Germans, by contrast, explored the use of aircraft in a troop-supporting ground-attack role and also pioneered more flexible tactics such as that of the 'indirect assault' (the attack and capture of a lesser position, the effect of which results in the fall of the main objective). New tactics demanded a new type of soldier, and

***Right:** Leutnant Ernst Udet, later a general and – from 1936 – head of the* Luftwaffe*'s Technical Office. Udet was a driving force behind the development of the* Luftwaffe*'s air fleet, yet the onset of depression caused by his poor relations with Göring led to his suicide in 1941.*

***Above:** The inspiration behind the* Fallschirmjäger*: Russian paratroopers board an ANT-6 transport aircraft in the mid-1930s. Early Red Army parachute deployment was somewhat hazardous and involved climbing from the centre hatch out onto the wing before jumping and pulling the ripcord manually.*

Germany also pushed through the creation of 'assault troops', specially trained units capable of applying decisive firepower in a shock attack.

These developments did not render the trench obsolete in World War I, but after 1918 'mobility' and 'flexibility' became the tactical watchwords for the future. In 1927 the British Army established the Experimental Armoured Force (EAF), a prototype fighting unit which mixed tanks, machine-gun squads and artillery in a fully mechanised body. Simultaneously, the French, Russians and Germans had started pioneering techniques of armoured assault. Heinz Guderian, who later became Commander of Mobile Troops in November 1938, immersed himself in the ideas of armoured warfare and concluded that mobility was essential to both offensive and defensive actions. And in 1933 General Udet, the future head of the *Luftwaffe*'s Technical Office, witnessed a demonstration in the United States of Curtiss F8C Helldiver ground-attack aircraft which so inspired him that on his

Above: *A paratrooper descends during an exercise in the 1930s. The image gives a particularly clear view of the RZ1 parachute which served the* Fallschirmjäger *until 1941. By 1933 the DFS-230 glider had also been developed as a method of deployment.*

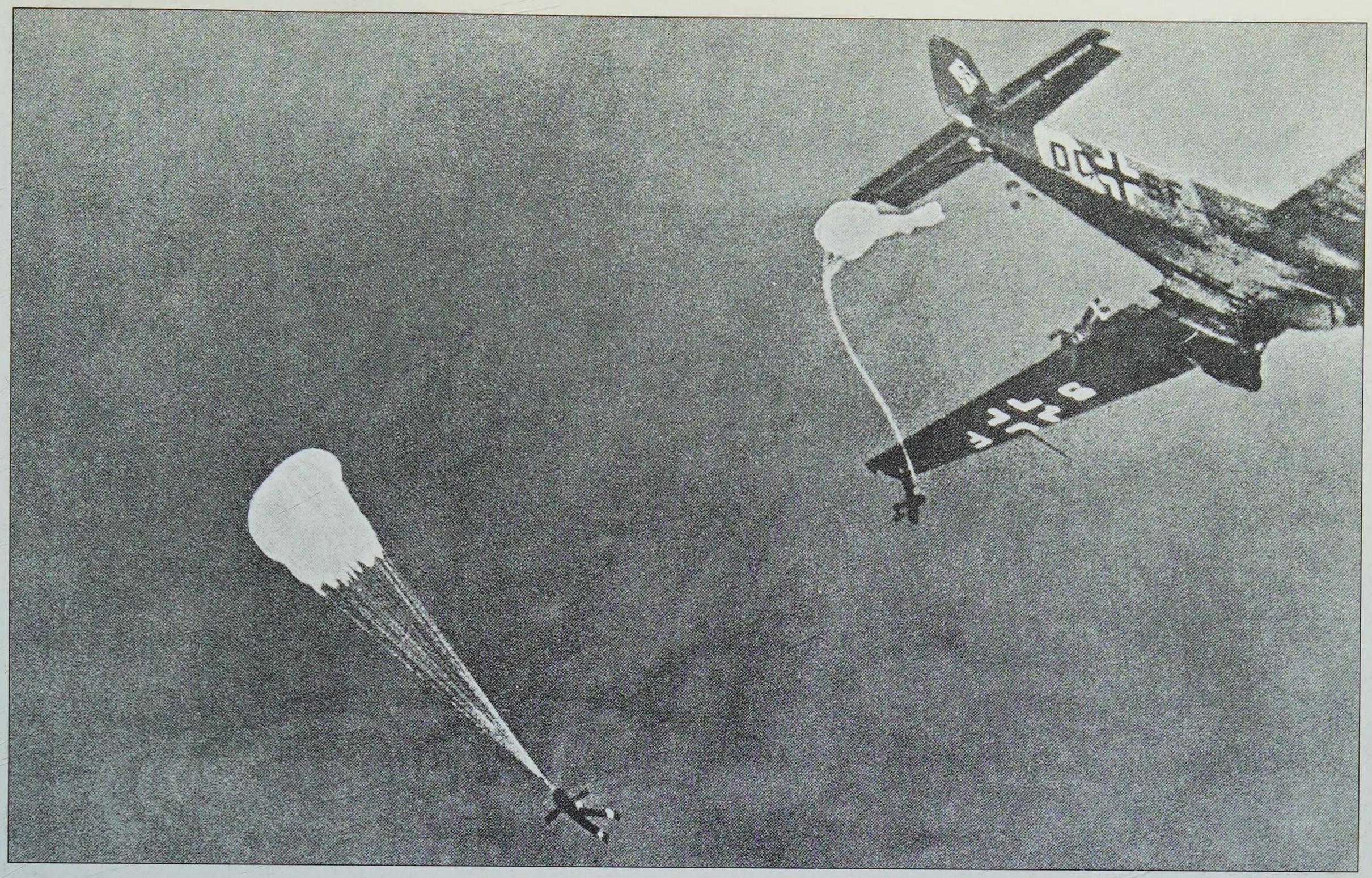
Above: *Taken in autumn 1939, this photograph offers a useful view of the* Fallschirmjäger *uniform. Dressed in a pre-war RZ1 harness and the thigh-length jump smock, the* Fallschirmjäger *is clutching the static-line hook in his right hand.*

return to Germany he commissioned the design of what would be the Junkers Ju-87 (Stuka) dive-bomber.

Across the Western world opinions were changing rapidly about how war should be fought, mostly in favour of the mobility of air- and armoured power. It was in this context that the *Fallschirmjäger* was born. Parachute troops used in an airborne assault offered the ultimate mobility for Germany's land-based troops and could completely alter battlefield dimensions and dynamics. Deployed either by their own parachutes or by purpose-

Above right: *An early photograph of* Fallschirmjäger *jumping from a Ju-52 transporter. Note the vertical dive position of the man just leaving the aircraft – this was necessary to cope with the impact of the parachute opening, as can be seen just below him.*

Right: *Supply containers (known as* waffenhälter*) being dropped along with paratroopers during pre-war exercises. The problem of getting both to land in the same drop zone was never resolved satisfactorily during the war, and cost many lives.*



***Above:** This paratrooper is armed with a holstered pistol, an MP38, triple magazine pouches and a stick grenade. Even such light armament as this could not be worn during a parachute jump because of the danger it would pose on landing.*

designed gliders, they offered the chance for commanders to transcend on-the-ground boundaries with great tactical versatility.

The foundation of the 'Eagles'

The first direct action towards the establishment of the German parachute force occurred on 23 February 1933. At that time the newly established Nazi government was prosecuting attacks against communist cells operating within the Berlin area. As a combative measure, Prussian Minister of the Interior Herman Göring established a special police unit called *Polizeiabteilung Wecke* (Police Detachment Wecke), named after the man responsible for its construction and command, Police Major Wecke. Although not a parachute unit in itself (it was formed mainly from members of the *Berlin Schutzpolizei*, or Berlin Protection Police), the force contained numbers of parachute-trained troops which were used instead of more conventional ground units to carry out surprise assaults against the communists.

By 1935 the continuing investment in airborne training and its increasing combat success gave the unit (renamed Provincial Police Group Göring since Christmas 1933) an elite reputation. The group consisted of three *Jäger* (light) battalions, one of which, retitled the 1st Parachute Rifle Battalion, was dedicated to the tactics and applications of airborne assault. On 1 April 1935 the mother regiment was given the name Regiment Herman Göring, and was initially under the auspices of the *Wehrmacht*. By this time, however, Göring was commander-in-chief of the *Luftwaffe* and the inspiration he gained from the Russian experiments in airborne combat led him to absorb the unit into the *Luftwaffe* six months later. Now the training of Germany's first parachute corps was imminent and the regimental commander, Oberstleutnant Jacoby, was instructed directly from the Air Ministry to start gathering volunteers for parachute service.

Paratroopers in formation

The recruitment drive resulted in the formation of the 1st Battalion of the General Göring Parachute Battalion. The official date for the foundation of the paratroop corps was 29 January 1936, when Göring and Erhard Milch, Göring's deputy in the *Luftwaffe*, authorised an Order of the Day which specified the composition, physical qualities and procedural issues relating to 'the training of the parachutist section of the General Göring Regiment'. The battalion commander was one Major Bruno Bräuer, in charge of around 600 volunteers who would attempt to become airborne assault troops. Altengrabow was the battalion's provisional training area, but in February 1936 an official *Luftwaffe* Paratroop Training School was established at the Stendal-Bostel Airfield.

While Bräuer controlled the overall formation and training of the battalion, a Major Bassenge was given jurisdiction over the initial development of tactics. The geographical flexibility of parachute soldiers was now realisable through German military transport aircraft – particularly the Junkers Ju-52, which would become the true aerial workhorse of the paratroop regiments. Such aircraft gave the paratroopers the abilities of precision placement and low-altitude deployment, vital factors in achieving operational surprise and unit concentration. To expand tactical opportunities while on the ground, the 1st Battalion also acquired the engineers of No.15 Company, General Göring Regiment, who volunteered en masse for the new airborne role.

Army and Air Force

By October 1936, a month during which the new parachute battalion made its first public drop during manoeuvres in Lower Saxony, the *Wehrmacht* High Command was very aware of this innovative body of troops emerging from the *Luftwaffe*. Consequently, the army formed its own parachute unit under the command of an

Oberleutnant Zahn, a unit which also operated out of Stendal-Bostel Airfield in the absence of a dedicated *Wehrmacht* parachute training ground.

The army paratroopers were conceived along rather different lines to those of the *Luftwaffe*. Whereas the *Luftwaffe* utilised fairly lightly armed soldiers, the *Wehrmacht*'s *Schwere-Fallschirm-Infanterie-Kompanie* (Heavy Parachute Infantry Company) was capable of deploying heavy machine-guns and mortars to give the paratroopers the capability for more strategic operations. By spring 1937 this unit was being deployed in major *Wehrmacht* manoeuvres in Mecklenburg, and by 1938 it had reached battalion strength. This expansion was facilitated by a change in leadership, as the robust and dynamic 41-year-old Major Richard Heidrich took control on 1 March 1938. Heidrich oversaw the rapid development of the army paratroopers in all aspects of morale, potential and capability, and on 4 November 1938 they moved from Stendal-Bostel Airfield to new training grounds at Braunschweig-Riddagshausen.

On 1 April 1938 Bräuer's men became *I. Bataillon, Fallschirmjäger-Regiment* (I./FJR 1: 1st Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment), by now formally detached from the General Göring Regiment. But Germany's paratrooper forces were in effect split along classic army/air force lines, their divisions included major differences of opinion over paratrooper tactics and significance. As we have seen, the armaments of the *Schwere-Fallschirm-Infanterie-Kompanie* constituted it very much as a conventional unit deployed from the air. The 1937 manoeuvres had indeed showed that a large force could be dropped as part of a wider conventional attack. It is notable in this regard that the army also trained up the 22nd Infantry Division in an airlanding role (direct landing by gliders or transporters). The *Luftwaffe*, by contrast, envisaged the paratroopers

***Below:** A peaceful scene in 1939 just prior to the outbreak of World War II. From its inception, the* **Fallschirmjäger** *strove to imbue all its troops with an intense comradeship borne of arduous training and a self-confidence in their elite abilities.*

Above: **Fallschirmjäger** *in a training line-up. Once war had broken out, the unit's rapidly mounting losses meant that new recruits formed an ever-higher percentage of the troops available.*

Left: *General der Flieger Student inspects his troops in 1940. A former fighter squadron commander in World War I, Student led the German airborne forces from 1938 to the end of the war and felt passionately about the welfare of his men.*

being used along the lines evoked in von Schlieffen's much earlier vision, namely that of deployments of small, commando-style units with tightly defined assault objectives – such as the destruction of an enemy headquarters or the occupation of a certain vantage point. As it turned out in the war itself, these perspectives were simply two sides of the same 'airborne' coin, but the opposition was maintained with conviction.

Some progress towards resolving the tensions was made on 1 July 1938 when the *Luftwaffe*'s Generalmajor Kurt Student was appointed as the overall commander of Germany's airborne forces, now to be known as the 7th *Flieger Division* (7th Air Division) with its headquarters at Templehof. The 7th Air Division was listed as a *Wehrmacht* unit, although it actually consisted of the *Luftwaffe*'s paratrooper, glider and air transport forces under *Luftwaffe* command. Student infused the 7th Air Division with his own passion and pride, and the esprit de corps that the paratroopers had held since their formation was greatly reinforced. More importantly, Student generally sided with the army over tactical interpretation. Small-scale saboteur operations, he argued, would most likely be suicidal in nature since it would be hard to retrieve the troops once they were deployed. By contrast, large-scale parachute drops would create an incredible shock to enemy forces. His views were thoughtful and well considered, and they gave real attention to the possible effects on morale of certain tactical choices. A *Luftwaffe* officer siding with army tactics did ease some of the dissension, though the schisms were further ameliorated when the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (Armed Forces High Command, or OKW) issued a directive in 1938 which validated both tactical perspectives as options for airborne operations.

The paratroopers of the army and the air force finally achieved their full and formal amalgamation on 1 January 1939. The *Luftwaffe*'s 1st Parachute Battalion remained, while Heidrich's men, in battalion strength since June 1938, became the 2nd Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment. A third battalion would come into being just before the onset of war, and a second parachute regiment under the command of Heidrich was established prior to Germany's operations in Scandinavia. Supplementing the 7th Air Division were General von Sponek's 22nd Infantry Division and an air-landing battalion of the General Göring Regiment under Major Sydow. In addition, an airborne artillery battalion (No.7) was formed in 1938 under Leutnant Bruno Schram, a force armed with a variety of small-calibre artillery pieces and mortars which could be broken down and deployed by parachute in containers.

So by 1939 the 7th Air Division and auxiliary units constituted a complete resource for airborne operations. Troops could be deployed by parachute, glider or transporter, with artillery, mortar and heavy machine-gun support if necessary. If a parachute operation was involved, Ju-52s would usually carry 12–18 men to the dropping zone, while for glider deployment a Gotha DFS-230 glider was capable of holding nine men or 1000kg (2205lb) of equipment. The vision of people such as von Schlieffen, Mitchell and other perceptive military figures was now finding its fullest expression to date within the German *Fallschirmjäger*.

The gathering storm

By the time the 7th Air Division marched past Adolf Hitler on its first official parade in Berlin on 20 April 1939, war was imminent. Prior to the outbreak of World War II it seemed the *Fallschirmjäger* would be called upon to help enact Hitler's planned occupation of the Sudetenland. The Sudetenland was the mountainous rim on the northwest part of Czechoslovakia, just across the border with Germany. Its population was overwhelmingly ethnic German and this made it an especially contentious region, and in 1938 Hitler planned to annex the territory by force.

To assist this operation, Generalmajor Student was requested to prepare an airborne assault against key Czech defences. The 7th Air Division was brought to full combat readiness with the addition of Major Sydow's airlanding battalion, the 16th Regiment of the 22nd Infantry Division, the *Standarte Feldherrnhalle* ('Hall of Glory') *Sturmabteilung* (SA) Regiment, and *Luftwaffe* formations which included six Ju-52 transport groups, three Ju-87 Stuka squadrons and a large number of fighter aircraft. With the operation scheduled for 15 September 1938, Student began extensive manoeuvres early that month. Greater use of gliders came out of such preparations, and soon many pilots had been trained in the use of DFS-230s for airborne troop-carrying and deployment.

The deadline for the operation passed without action owing to last-minute Anglo-French negotiations with Hitler which culminated in the Munich agreement at the end of September. This deal ultimately allowed Germany to reoccupy the Sudetenland without firing a single shot, and Germany's frustrated airborne forces were only committed in an occupation role in the Freudenthal area in October, though elements of the 7th Air Division were deployed in a 250-plane airlanding exercise. However, a notable change occurred following the Sudetenland operations, in that the 22nd Infantry Division was now officially designated as the 22nd Airlanding Division. A year would pass before combat opportunities for the *Fallschirmjäger* arose again, but this time it would be the beginning of World War II.

***Right:** The full might of the 7th Air Division march through Berlin on 20 April 1939. Only a year later, the* **Fallschirmjäger** *would be fighting in Norway, Holland and Belgium, founding its elite reputation and taking the first casualties of a bloody five years of all-out war.*

CHAPTER 2

RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

German paratrooper training transformed a new recruit into a fully fledged airborne combatant in eight weeks, and instilled the pride and regimental loyalty that ran throughout the *Fallschirmjäger*.

***Left:** A paratrooper takes up a perfect jump position in the door of a Ju-52. German parachute training was one of the world's most exacting programmes of military instruction at that time.*

***Above:** Generalmajor Student inspects ranks of* Fallschirmjäger *in the early 1940s. The troopers are wearing splinter pattern camouflage smocks, issued around the time of the Crete invasion.*

Regardless of nationality, paratrooper soldiers have always held an elite status within the ranks of military personnel. Much of this standing is gained through the rigour and severity of the training undertaken before they can officially be awarded their parachute wings. The *Fallschirmjäger* was (and still is) no exception to this. From the very earliest days of their formation, Germany's would-be paratroopers had to demonstrate exceptional levels of physical and mental stamina, as well as the strength of personality needed to form part of a cohesive, confident and motivated body of men.

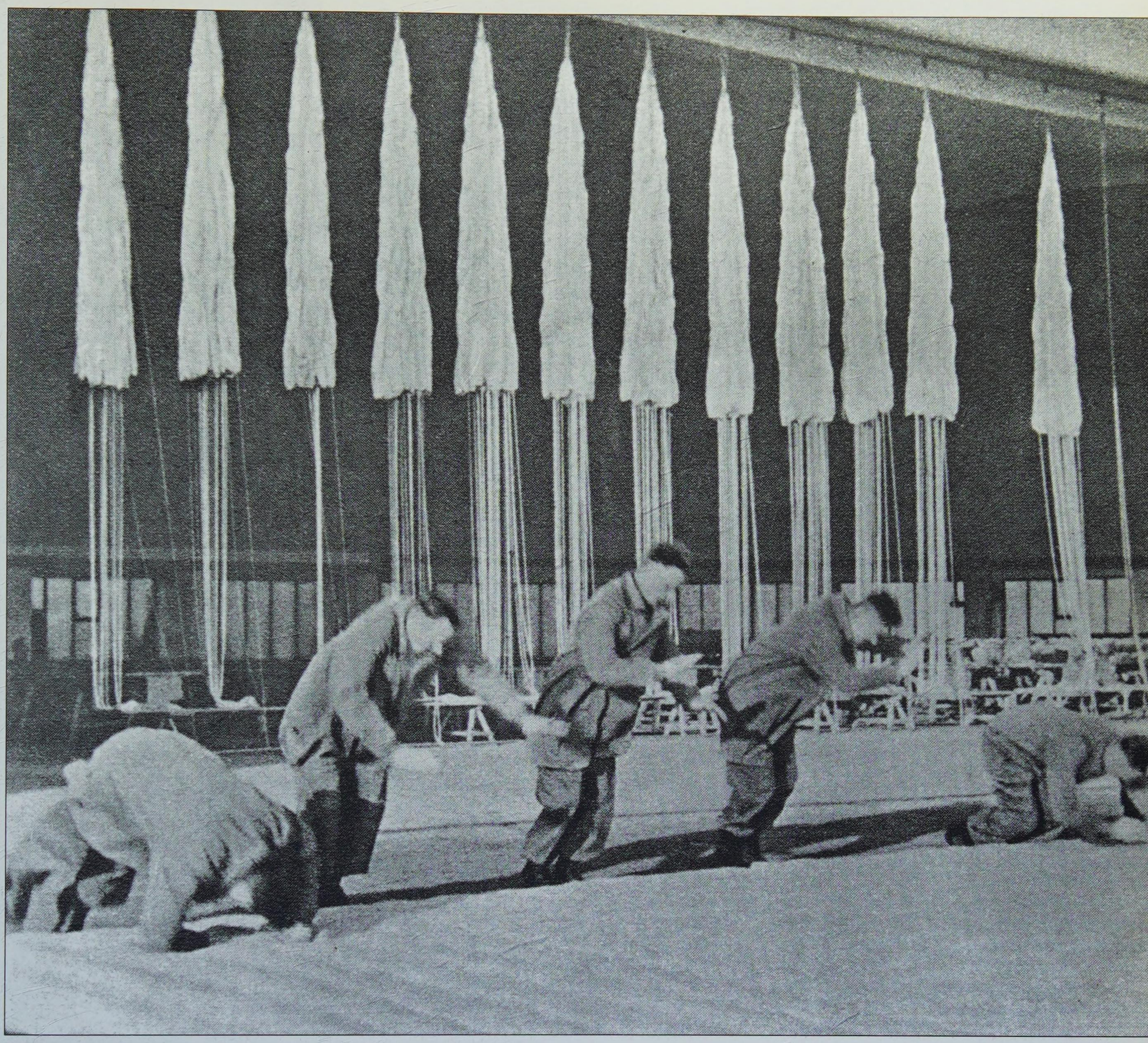
Above: *A paratrooper recruit practises methods of directional control in the training gymnasium. Behind him can be seen the jump platform which replicated the aircraft doorway of a Ju-52 and enabled recruits to practice the treacherous roll landings from a height of three metres (10ft).*

Right: *By waving the arms and legs up and down, a paratrooper was hopefully able to turn himself to face downwind for the actual landing, almost the limit of his control over his descent.*

It took eight weeks of training to turn a young volunteer into a combat-ready *Fallschirmjäger*. This period was not simply a case of imparting the paratrooper's skills, but also of instilling the right attitude and self-belief in order to enable a soldier to undertake some of the most demanding combat duties in the German forces.

Volunteers

One of the central reasons why the *Fallschirmjäger* operated with such discipline and enthusiasm was the fact that volunteers formed the bulk of new recruits. Yet the link to a career in the parachute regiments was frequently indirect, as many recruits, particularly during the pre-war period, were often drawn from those who were specifically involved in the *Luftwaffe*'s aviation activities at a pre-enlistable age.



***Above:** Landing training. Here the forward roll technique looks easy enough, but the addition of a full parachute harness, an uneven landing surface and bad weather conditions meant that many serious injuries were sustained at the real drop zones. Note the RZ1 parachutes hanging in the background – it was necessary to air and dry these after each jump.*

Following World War I, the Versailles Treaty prohibited Germany from operating military aircraft, a ban that was circumvented by the establishment of several, ostensibly civilian, flight training organisations. The 1920s, for instance, saw pilot training being delivered through the *Luftsportverband*, a group which gave instruction in glider flying. Yet once Hitler's *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP, or National Socialist German Workers' Party) were established in government in 1933, such flying schools were able to produce politically motivated individuals as well as qualified pilots. The *Luftwaffe* held an understandable attraction for German youth, and prior to World War II there were two primary paramilitary organisations for young aviators: the *Flieger-HJ* (HJ standing for *Hitlerjugend*) and the *Nationalsozialist Fliegerkorps* (NSFK).

Both bodies provided educational outlets for young enthusiasts (all activities could lead to the award of merit badges) and enabled the authorities to train up many individuals in aviation techniques with corresponding, basic military applications. The *Flieger-HJ* was the flying branch of the massively popular *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth) movement, a group catering to the 14–18 age bracket and which had a membership of 7.7 million by the end of 1933. The *Flieger-HJ*'s common activities were aviation modelling competitions and the flying and maintenance of gliders. NSFK members

Above: *A rear view of the standard RZ1 parachute pack. The vertical storage of the static line on the pack indicates that it is one of the earlier versions; later versions had the static line secured horizontally at the top of the pack.*

were similarly occupied, though they tended to concentrate on more advanced glider construction and flight.

Naturally, once the young men were of age many of them volunteered for the *Luftwaffe*. It was at this stage that *Fallschirmjäger* selection could begin. All *Luftwaffe* recruits had to undergo a screening to judge where they would be most suitably applied. As the *Fallschirmjäger* was actively in the process of its formation during the early 1930s, recruiters were particularly on the lookout for physically and mentally fit individuals for the parachute corps. If such a person was found, and provided he was under the maximum permissible weight of 85kg (187lb) fully clothed (according to Göring's training directive issued on 29 January 1936), he was given the opportunity to proceed through to training.

Not all the *Fallschirmjäger* volunteers, however, were from pre-military training organisations; many others joined up from within the existing military ranks, attracted by the possibilities of a new and more exciting branch of the forces. In the *Luftwaffe*, volunteers often came from the ranks of those with more menial duties; in the *Wehrmacht*, group recruitment from existing infantry units was common. For example, shortly after the 1st Parachute Battalion moved to its new camp at Stendal-Bostel

Right: *A* Fallschirmjäger *recruit launches himself from a jump platform to be caught by his comrades below, the purpose being to learn the correct dive angle of jump. A month of ground-based training was necessary before recruits made their first jump.*

Below: *A profile of the same paratrooper with the RZ1 pack. All* Fallschirmjäger *parachutes were operated by static line because it gave a precise point of opening, enabling a lower drop altitude than the manually operated ripcords used by aviators.*

***Above:** A bird's eye view from the jump platform. Although parachute training was the most distinct part of induction, priority was also given to weapons and tactics training.*

***Left:** Paratroopers jump into sand from a replica Ju-52. Good positioning was vital; a faulty stance might mean that the pack caught on the frame or the man entered the slip-stream dangerously positioned.*

Airfield, Oberleutnant Lothar Schulz, the commander of No.15 Company (engineers) of the General Göring Regiment, was requested by Major Bräuer to ask for volunteers for a pioneer company for the new parachute force. When the offer was made on the parade ground, Schulz's entire company volunteered themselves for service.

The pre-war period, then, saw no shortage of keen recruits for the *Fallschirmjäger*, and the eagerness to join the new formation only expanded as the paratroops started to gain their wartime reputation after September 1939. *Fallschirmjäger* enlistment was given particular impetus following individual parachute operations. The German propaganda magazine *Signal* featured extensive photo-essays on the *Fallschirmjäger*'s role in Holland, Belgium and Norway and the well-publicised capture of Crete in 1941 brought

in a substantial number of fresh men. But before any new recruit could qualify they had to pass through a demanding programme.

Learning the ropes

The training of a *Fallschirmjäger* lasted for eight weeks and was evenly divided into four weeks' basic training and four weeks' instruction in parachute technique. Basic training consisted of an intensified version of standard infantry instruction, each recruit being taught fundamental combat skills – use of weaponry, demolitions, tactical deployment – and, of course, marching and parade ground skills. This half of training was physically severe, with 30km (18.6-mile) forced marches being common. The recruits would be made especially aware of the gulf of seniority between them and their qualified counterparts and instructors. Discipline, however, was not as severe as in some military units, with as great an emphasis being placed on innate strength of character as the real driving force behind the paratrooper's efforts.

If the recruit made it satisfactorily through the first four weeks, then he was allowed to proceed to the part of training which would distinguish him as a member of an airborne regiment. Parachute training lasted for a further month and by the end of it the new recruit would have made six successful parachute jumps before he could take his parachute 'wings'.

Far left: Fallschirmjäger *board a Ju-52/3m trimotor transport in readiness for a training jump. The Ju-52 was used as a parachute aircraft, for glider-towing and also for airlanding operations – and it was tested in all these roles in the Low Counries in 1940.*

Left: *A paratrooper helps his comrade ensure that his static line is correctly prepared. From 1933 the development of parachute technology was the responsibility of the* Luftwaffe*'s Technical Equipment Division.*

Below: *Paratroopers load up a Ju-52 for an airlanding operation. Between 12 and 18 men could be carried 965km (600 miles), but the Ju-52's slow cruising speed of 210kmh (125mph) left it vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire.*

Left: An instructional photograph demonstrating the ripcord operation on a parachute pack. Each man was given his own parachute at the beginning of his jump training, and it was his sole responsibility to make sure that it was properly maintained.

***Above:** Paratroopers board their aircraft prior to a jump. Although parachute operations were seldom mounted after Crete, training continued throughout the war at schools not only in Germany but also in the occupied countries, particularly France.*

***Above:** Two paratroopers climb into a Ju-52, static-line hooks clenched in their teeth. As the war went on, more paratroopers had to conduct their jump training from aircraft such as the He-111 and Do-23 owing to shortages of Ju-52s.*

Jump training naturally began on the ground and in the gymnasium, for the recruits would first have to master the basic body dynamics of jumping and landing, and also learn the theory of airborne deployment. After practising ground rolls until they came to the men fluently, the recruits would practise them when jumping from a static aircraft door at a height of three metres (10ft), leaping initially into sand. Then they would practise techniques of gaining their feet when being dragged across the ground by an open parachute, the 'wind' source being provided by powerful aircraft propellers. Once all these ground techniques had been mastered, the recruit could proceed to his first parachute jump.

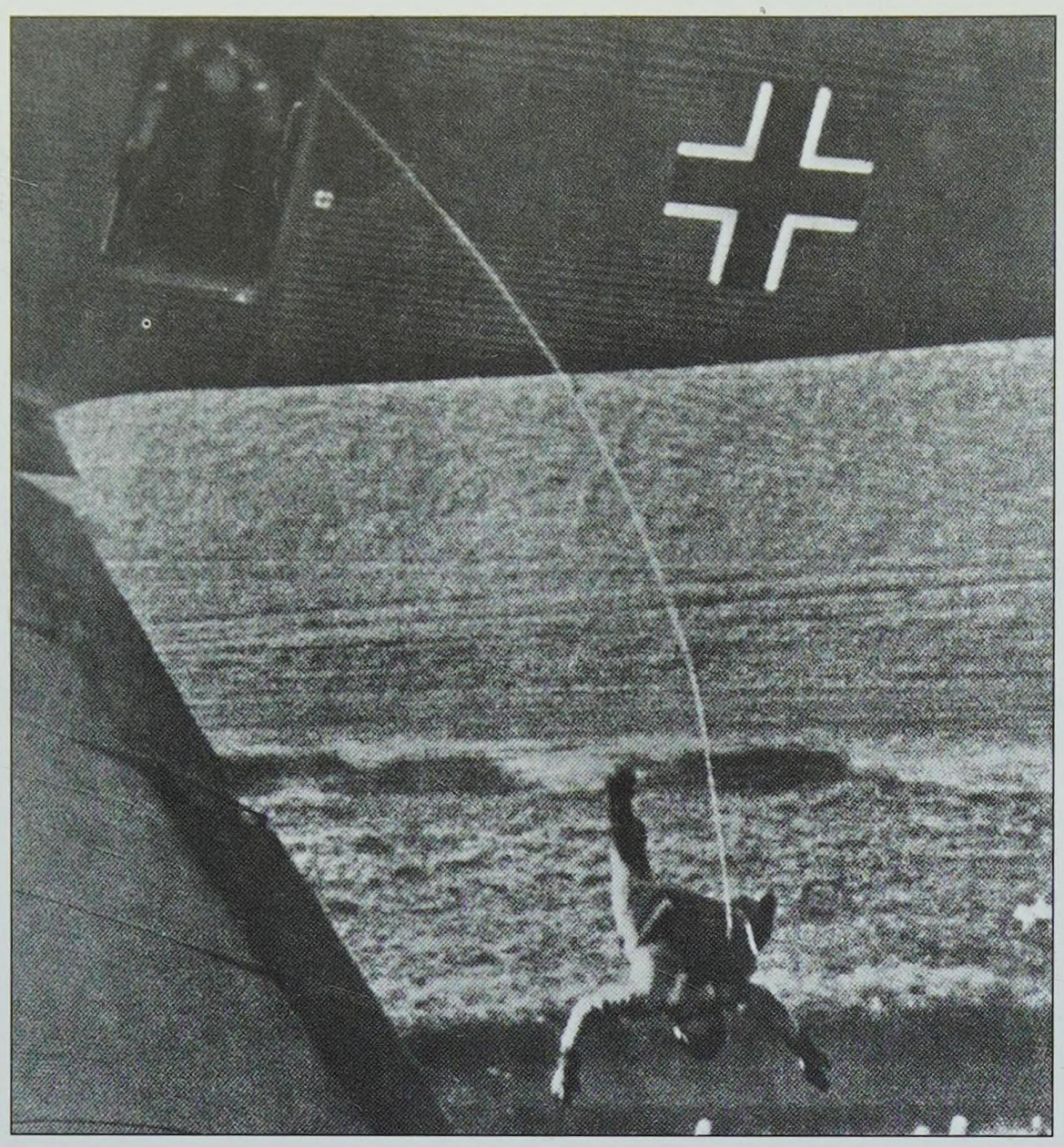
Opening 'the wings'

All paratroopers took responsibility for the maintenance and packing of their own parachute, even including their first jump – a duty which no doubt reinforced maximum levels of care and preparation, especially since the paratroopers jumped with no reserve 'chute (for in operational circumstances the low-level jump

altitudes would give no time for reserve 'chute deployment if the main 'chute failed). The *Fallschirmjäger*'s first purpose-designed parachute was the 8.5m- (28ft) diameter *Rückenpackung Zwangauslösung* 1 (RZ1), a round-cap 'chute with a canopy of 56 square metres (600 sq ft); later models included the RZ16, the RZ20 and the triangular RZ36 (for further details on parachute design and development, see pages 161–163). All parachutes were attached to the body by two straps which extended outwards from the shroud cords in an 'A'- shape to waist-belt D-rings above the hips. This

***Above:** Inside a Ju-52 a paratrooper attaches his static-line hook to the anchor line running down the centre of the fuselage. Such deployment not only enabled lower jump altitudes than manually operated parachutes, but also provided tighter landing patterns.*

contrasted with the four shoulder straps used on British parachutes (and, ironically, on *Luftwaffe* pilots' parachutes) which secured the parachute to the front and back of the shoulders and enabled some reasonable airborne steering. The *Fallschirmjäger* had to contend



with this bad design and he had almost no control over his direction once in the air; yet as the operational deployment height was often around 120m (400ft), there was often little opportunity for directional sophistication anyway.

The recruits' first jump would be made from an altitude of 250m (820ft), usually from a Junkers Ju-52 transport. This was by far the most common deployment aircraft used by the *Fallschirmjäger*, yet others included the Heinkel He-111 (which demanded a jump from a centre hatch under the fuselage) and the Dornier

***Left:** A dramatic photograph showing the head-first freefall of a paratrooper shortly before his static line draws the parachute from his pack; the next man in line is already preparing to jump. A stick of twelve paratroopers could deploy in just 30 seconds.*

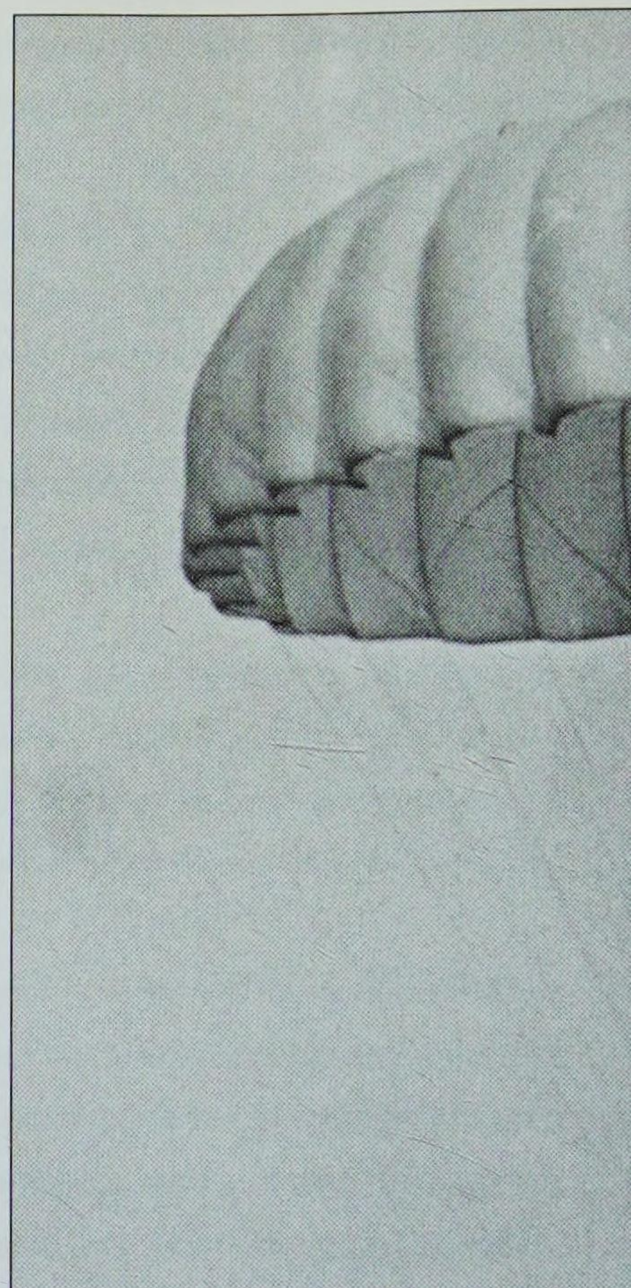
***Below:** Paratroopers jump in quick succession during a training exercise on 22 June 1938. With only a few seconds between each jump, airborne collisions between men were a real danger and lines could become entangled with fatal results. Rapid exiting was essential to give a tight concentration of forces on the ground.*

Do-23. If possible, there would often be an attempt during parachute training to give the recruits opportunities to jump from all three types of aircraft.

The first jump would be a nerve-racking experience, and there are many first-hand accounts of recruits being utterly debilitated by fear, some even resorting to suicide to avoid the shame of failure. The vast majority, however, did climb aboard the aircraft, entering with parachute static lines clamped between their teeth so as to free both hands for pulling them through the aircraft hatch.

Right: *A large-scale drop of* Fallschirmjäger, *on this occasion being delivered by Heinkel He-111 bombers rather than Ju-52s. Such drops demanded precise formation flying, something that was much harder to achieve when faced by anti-aircraft fire.*

Below: *This picture, taken from a Ju-52 on 9 April 1940 over Norway, indicates the low operational drop altitudes. Although training jumps generally took place around 250m (820ft), the urgency of combat drops compressed the height dramatically – in Crete heights of 150m (500ft) and below were common.*

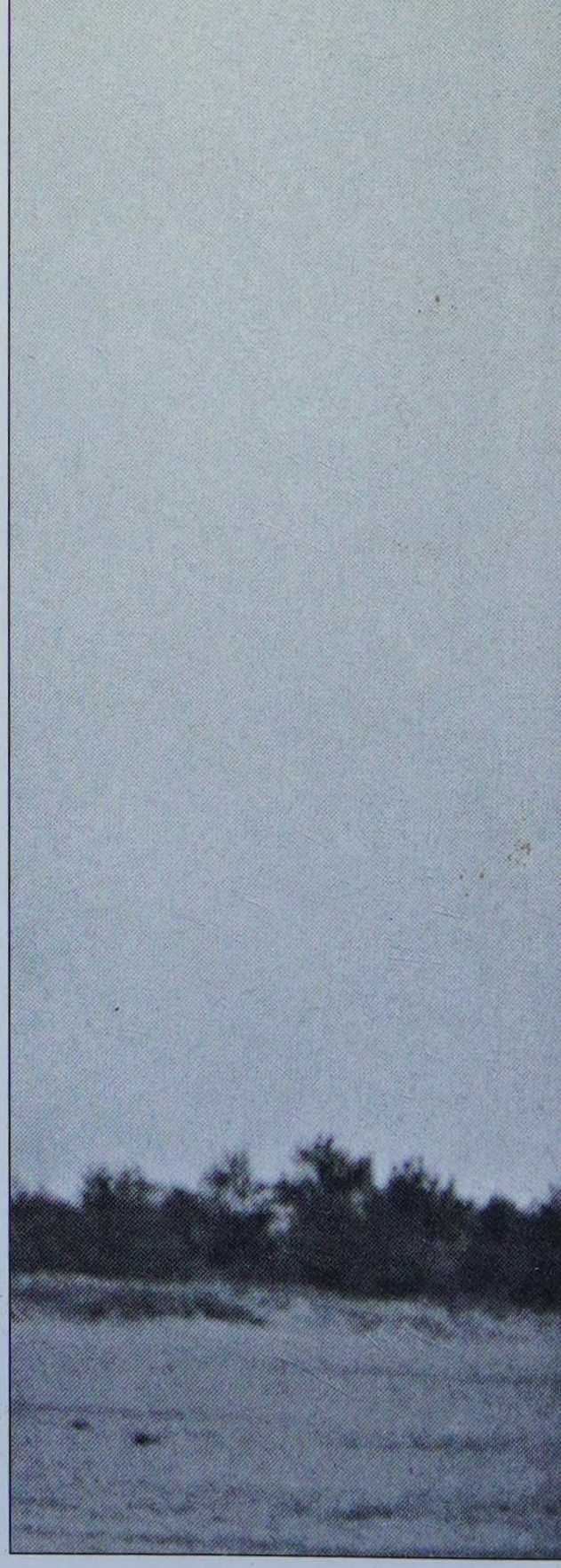


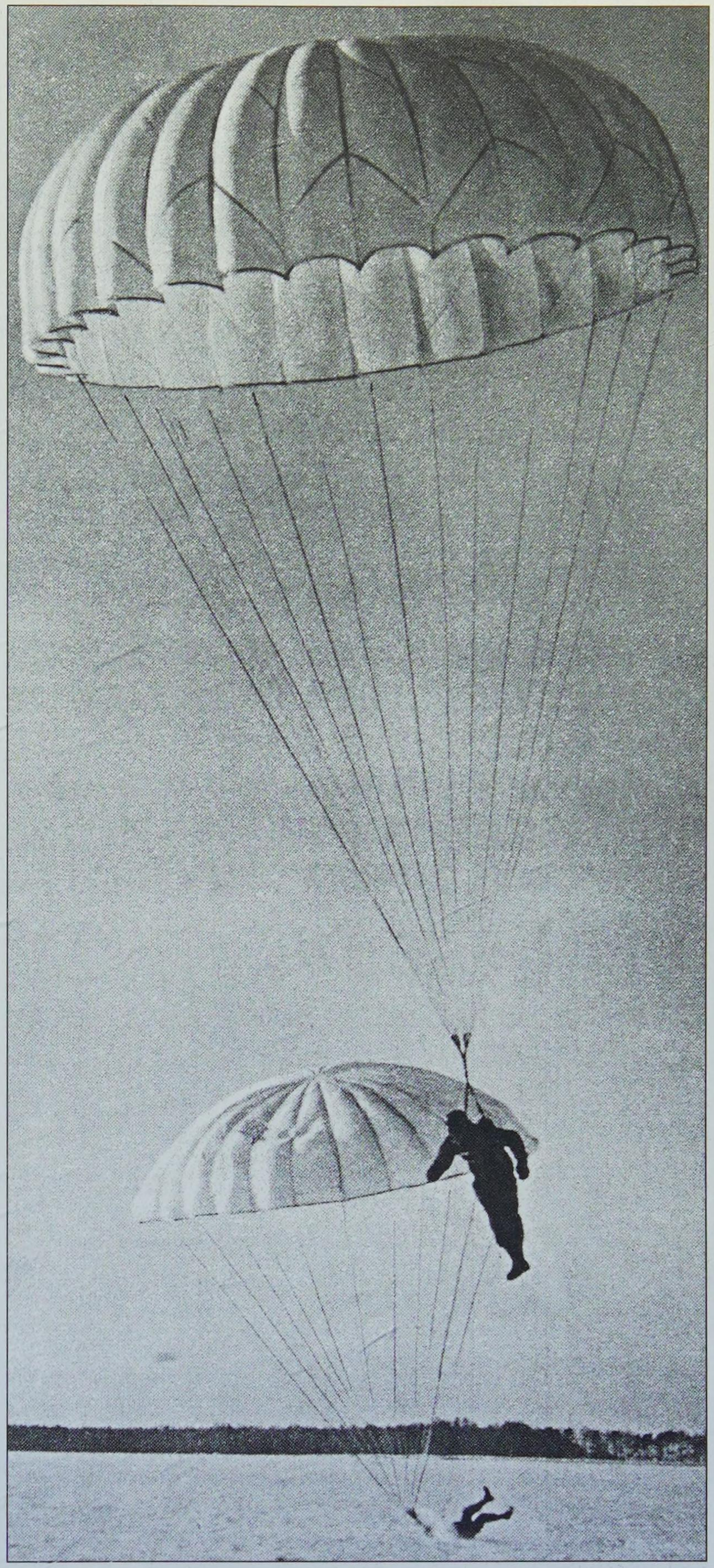
Above: Paratroopers undergo leg-strengthening exercises. The recruits had to have the muscle strength to resist the impact of jumping and landing, yet also the endurance to travel long distances from the drop zone.

Left: A Fallschirmjäger *poses in the doorway of a Ju-52 in the correct jumping posture. The first man in the line made the jump only when a green light came on, a klaxon sounded and the controller gave the instruction.*

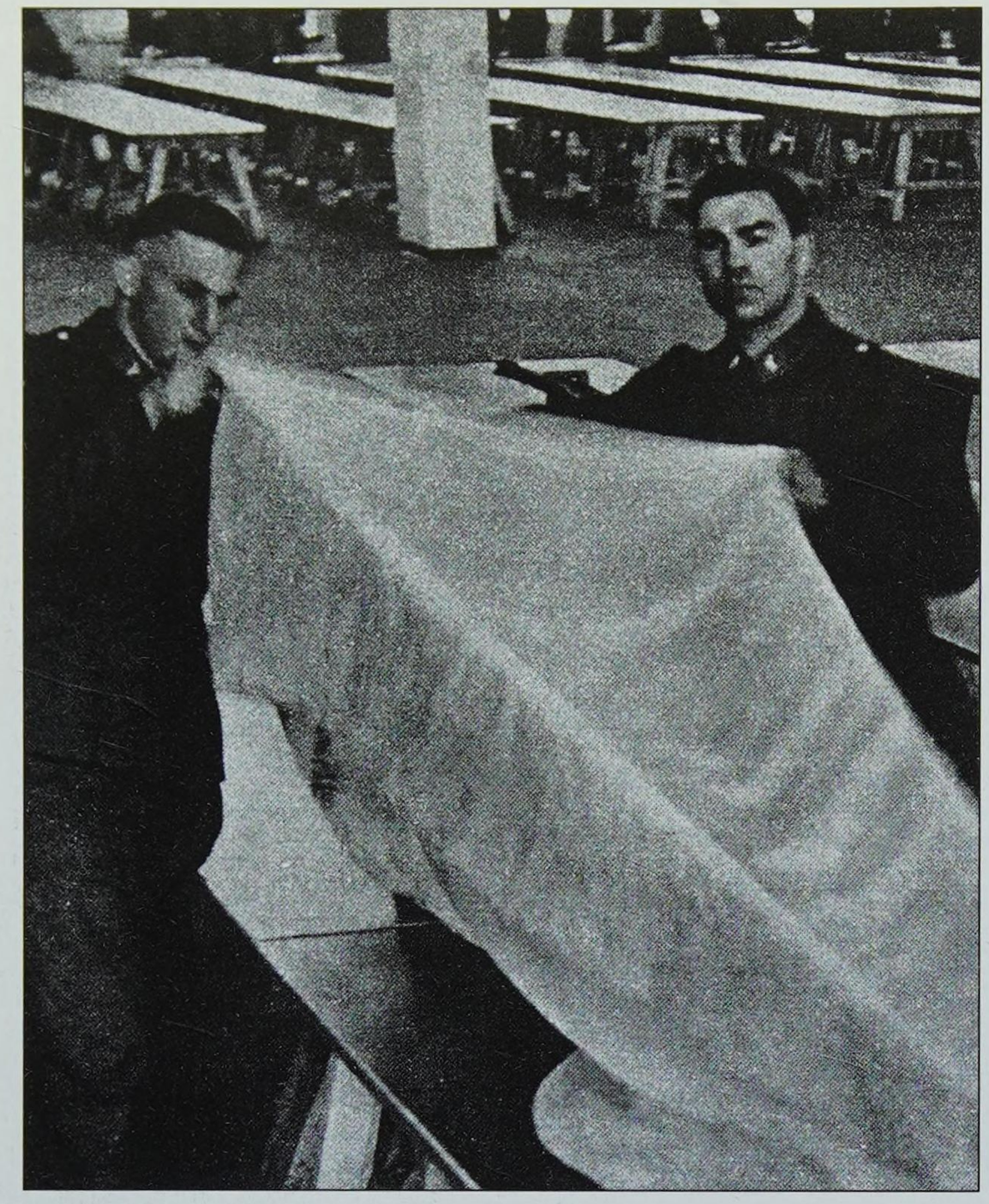
Right: Although the soldier in the air is correctly positioned facing into the landing, the uncontrolled manner of descent is clearly visible here.

Far right: A paratrooper lands heavily. If a proper roll was not executed on contact with the ground, damage could be sustained all too easily.





When the soldiers were approaching the drop zone they would be given the command by the *abstezer* ('the dispatcher') to 'prepare and hook up' – at which point they attached their static lines (the cable which would physically draw the parachute from its pack) to the anchor cable which ran the length of the aircraft interior. The first man in the line would approach the door. The preparatory jump position was one with feet wide apart on the aircraft door ledge while the hands gripped two rails, one either side of the door. From this braced position, once the instruction came to jump, the paratrooper would fling himself head first out of the

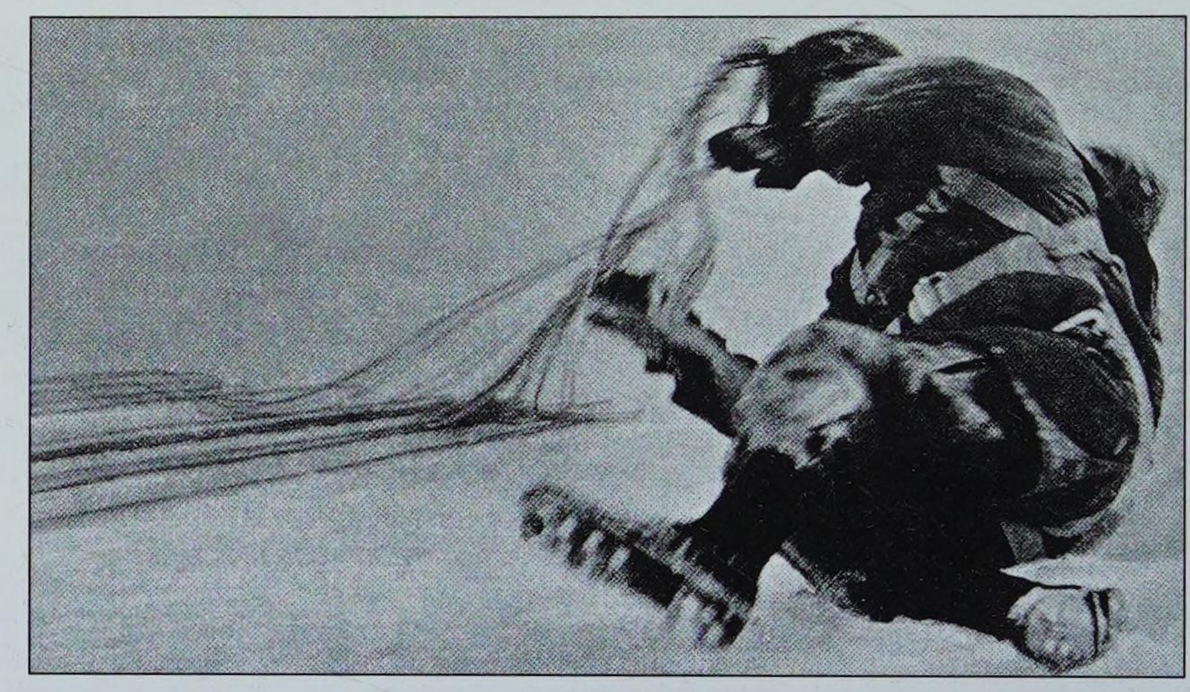


Above: *Two paratroopers go through the exacting process of folding a parachute ready for its insertion into the pack. By the time recruits made their first jump, they would have folded and packed a parachute numerous times as part of basic training.*

door. The vertical dive position was essential due to the snap-back of the opening parachute exerting its forces at waist level. The man would fall in a spread-eagle posture for nine metres (30ft) before the static line started to deploy his parachute. By about 25m (80ft) the parachute would be completely unfurled and the parachutist would drop at a rate of between 3.6 and 5.7m (12 and 19ft) per second. The other men would have followed in quick succession.

Landing was obviously one of the most awkward manoeuvres, especially as the paratrooper had little or no directional control. Although all weapons would have been deployed in separate

Below: *A paratrooper struggles with his lines after landing in snow. British paratroopers had a single quick-release mechanism, but the Germans had four buckles to undo and the diagonal body position on landing meant that it was often hard to get hold of the parachute lines if the wind was dragging you.*



***Left:** Paratroopers change their footwear during an exercise – note the ankle supports applied by the recruits for lower limb protection during landing. Training, however, was not entirely dominated by jumps; the men also underwent intensive commando-style combat training programmes.*

***Above:** Paratroopers gather up their 'chutes after a successful drop. Upon qualification, the award procedure varied greatly with some men receiving a full-scale ceremony while others were simply handed a certificate. There was usually a modest pay rise of around 75 Reichmarks – as well as a great deal of pride.*

containers for retrieval after landing, the soldier would still be heavily laden with ammunition and other items of kit. Ideally, the paratrooper aimed to turn his body using stirring and flapping motions of the arms so that he was facing downwind and could land by falling forwards onto his hands and knees (hence jump uniforms had protective padding at the elbows and knees) or by executing a forward roll. If he managed to do this without a serious fracture occurring and then demonstrated that he could quickly undo his four parachute buckles before (or while) being dragged across the ground, then his first jump had been a successful one.

Between each jump his parachute would have to be carefully washed, aired and dried before being repacked for the next jump. Five more jumps would have to be made before he was awarded his parachute badge. Only once these were completed could he call himself a *Fallschirmjäger*. The qualification insignia featured a gilt diving eagle clutching a black swastika, this image being framed by a silver oval wreath (sometimes chemically blackened) which represented laurel leaves on the left and oak leaves on the right. The badge was given in a blue presentation box with a certificate of achievement, and its award meant the end of training.

Spirit of the Fallschirmjäger

Throughout the training of the *Fallschirmjäger*, every exercise and duty was designed to weed out those of weak character and cement the remaining men in a bond of loyalty to one another and their officers. Like most elite regiments, those of the German parachute corps had a very inward-looking sense of pride, deriving satisfaction from the standards and discipline of their own regiment rather than the broader military context in which they performed.

As the commander of the German airborne forces, Generalmajor Kurt Student had his own vision of what would make a true *Fallschirmjäger* and he envisaged the primary eight weeks' training as just the beginning of the paratrooper's development. Student wanted to engender a very definite committment to the name, ethos and reputation of the parachute corps, feeling that only this would give the standards of excellence that he sought for his troops. Student himself described exactly what sort of regimental qualities he wanted to inspire:

'The first thing to do is to instil regimental spirit – to make a man proud of belonging to the parachute corps. This pride must stem from a comradeship which is wider and deeper than that of any other regiment or corps. Training must be based not on formal discipline based on fear and blind obedience but on the principle of mutual confidence . . . During the frequent visits I made to the parachute units, I tried to set an example by talking to individual paratroopers, discussing their personal problems and eliciting their opinions. I was pleased with the way this approach was received, and there is no doubt that the paratroop esprit de corps grew from strength to strength as the paratroop corps expanded. For a paratrooper to be expelled from the corps and transferred to

***Above:** A paratrooper NCO signals his men to move out. Hitler himself took an interest in the development of the* **Fallschirmjäger** *and went as far as to issue a list of commandments, advocating courage and toughness, to which the paratroopers should aspire.*

another unit for some transgression of the rules came to be regarded as a disgrace. The subsequent success of the paratroops in action may be attributed to this attitude.'

(Taken from Volkmar Kuhn, *German Paratroops in World War II*, 1978.)

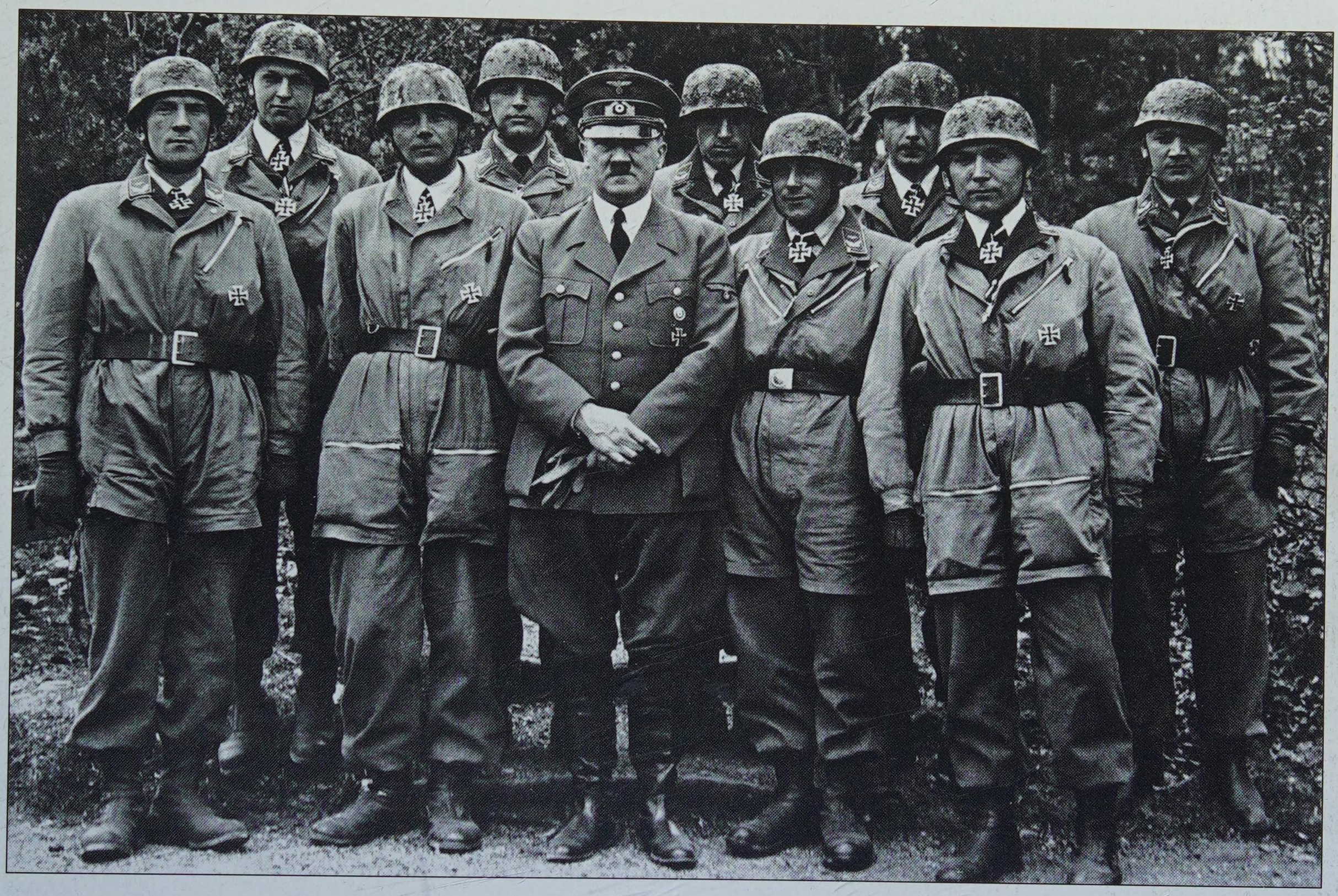
Student was not to be let down in his desire for a 'regimental spirit'. The *Fallschirmjäger* soon cohered into an exceptionally integrated force which required little or no external pressure to exercise discipline and mutual support. The unified nature of the corps was to be most fully expressed in combat, when it showed extraordinary levels of devotion in completing its allotted missions. Hauptmann Heinrich Pabst said of the *Fallschirmjäger* that 'the spirit of the parachute soldier is unquenchable'. Just how unquenchable was soon to be tested to the full once peacetime training found its active expression in a world war.

***Above:** Paratroopers go into action after alighting from their DFS-230 glider. Although successful in some actions and having the virtue of a silent approach, gliders were a treacherous method of deployment and particularly prone to crash-landing.*

CHAPTER 3

VINDICATION

Fallschirmjäger operations in 1940 were stunning illustrations of the men's capabilities and a confirmation that they had every right to proclaim their elite status.



***Left:** Three Ju-52s disperse a wave of* Fallschirmjäger *over the Netherlands on 10 May 1940. The invasion was the biggest airborne action that year, inserting over 14,000 troops by air.*

***Above:** Hitler poses with some of the newly decorated heroes of Eben Emael, including Leutnant Witzig (second from the left) and Hauptmann Koch (third from the left).*

Much to the frustration of those involved, the *Fallschirmjäger*'s initial contribution to World War II was rather inauspicious. The German invasion of Poland in 1939 had Student's airborne regiments designated for several operations, including Operation *Pulawy*, the capture of a significant bridge across the River Vistula. However, at the last minute (the paratroopers had already emplaned) the operations were called off because an advancing German armoured unit had already captured the objective. Yet Poland was still where the paratroopers conducted their first combat operations. Units were sent to occupy several airfields situated between the Vistula and Bug rivers, and it was during these missions that a *Fallschirmjäger* reconnaissance patrol came into contact with a Polish artillery regiment at Vola-Guloska and suffered some casualties – Feldwebel Meusel being listed as the first paratrooper fatality of the war.

Disappointed about the lack of airborne application during the Poland campaign, Student complained of his men's agitation when he was called to the Reichschancellery to talk to Hitler on

Above: *A German aviator pays his respects to a dead comrade on the Oslo-Fornebu airfield in Norway after heavy fighting by the HQ and No.2 Company of I./FJR 1. Caught up in a parachute, a* Fallschirmjäger *was very vulnerable upon initial landing.*

Left: *Operational planning prior to the Norway invasion. Under overall command of Hauptmann Walther, I.FJR 1 handled most of the operations; II./FJR 2 only arrived late in the campaign.*

Below: *A graphic illustration of the destruction wrought at Narvik in May 1940, mostly as a result of Royal Navy actions against German targets. The* Fallschirmjäger *entered on 8 June, by which time the Allies were evacuating Norway.*

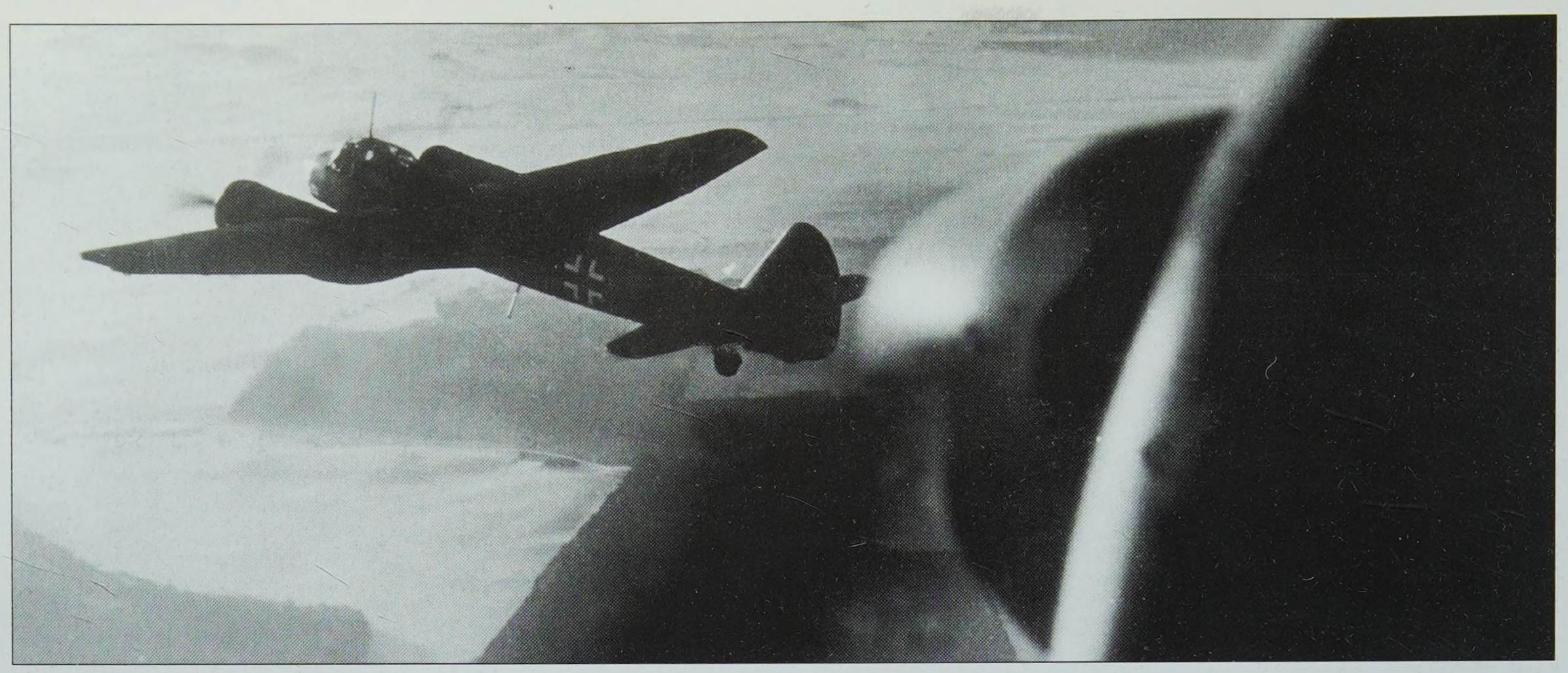
***Above:** German shipping sinks in Narvik. Contesting the takeover of the town in April, the Royal Navy sank two German destroyers and six merchant vessels in the harbour prior to major naval battles. Narvik was then isolated by the Allies until early June, despite paratrooper operations to break the deadlock.*

27 October. Hitler reassured Student that this situation would soon change, and justified his restraint on the grounds that the *Fallschirmjäger* was effectively a secret weapon whose talents should not be revealed too early. For Hitler did have high expectations of his airborne forces, and in April 1940 the paratroopers were to conduct their first major airborne operations.

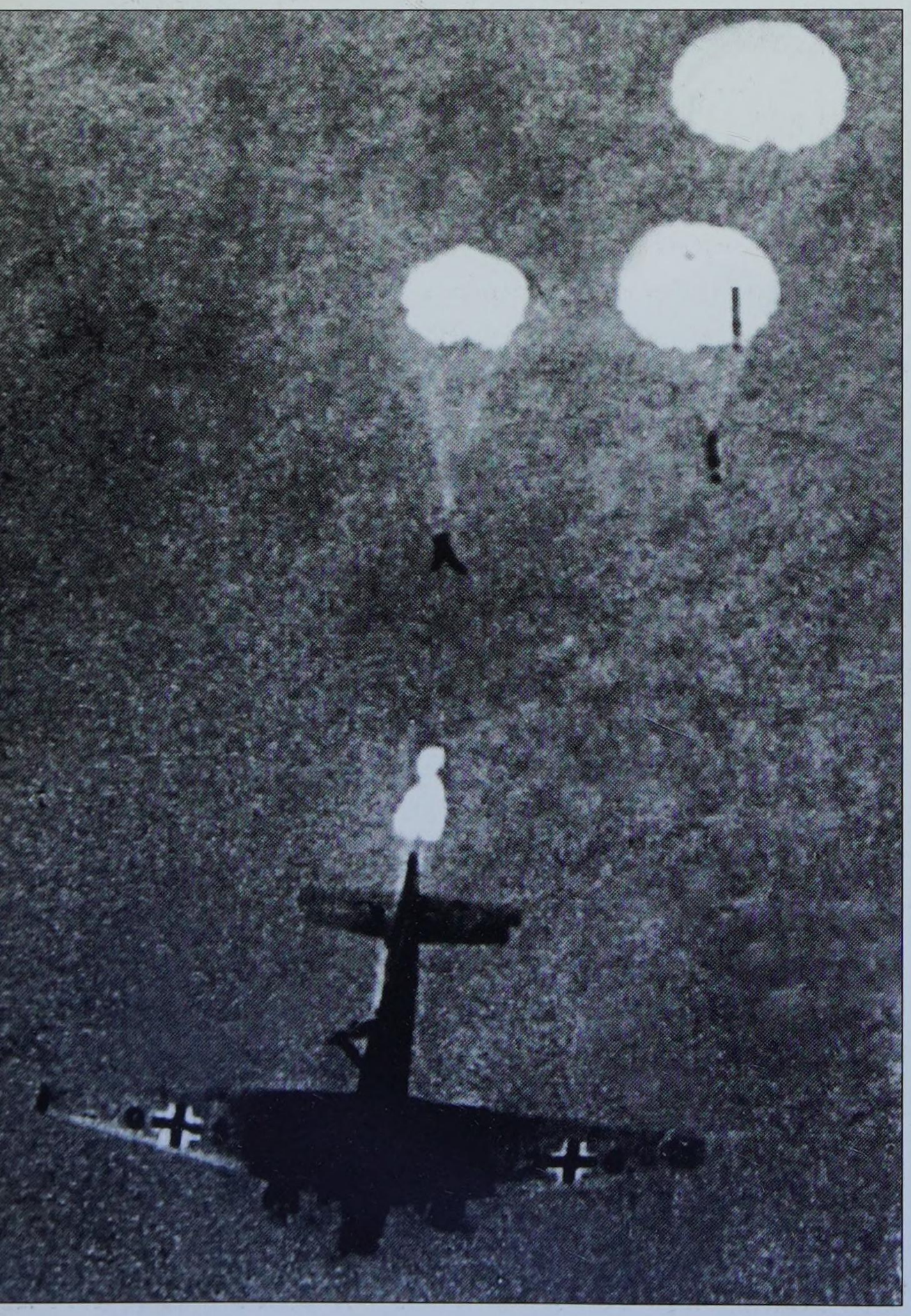
Norway and Denmark

It will be remembered that there were two fundamental positions on the use of airborne forces: surprise, commando-style assaults by limited numbers or mass attack as a conventional force. The first major paratrooper operations of the war were to revolve primarily around the former tactic.

With the invasion of Norway and Denmark on 9 April 1940, the *Fallschirmjäger* was applied primarily as a shock assault force for the rapid capture and defence of key bridges and airfields ahead of the main advance. The capture of bridges was vitally important for it would enable the speedy advance of German armour, while the taking of airfields throughout Denmark and southern Norway



***Above:** A Junkers Ju-88 makes its approach towards Narvik in April 1940. Various aircraft acted in support/escort roles during the invasion of Norway. At Oslo-Fornebu, for example, strafing runs by Me110s opened the way for successful Ju-52 airlandings.*



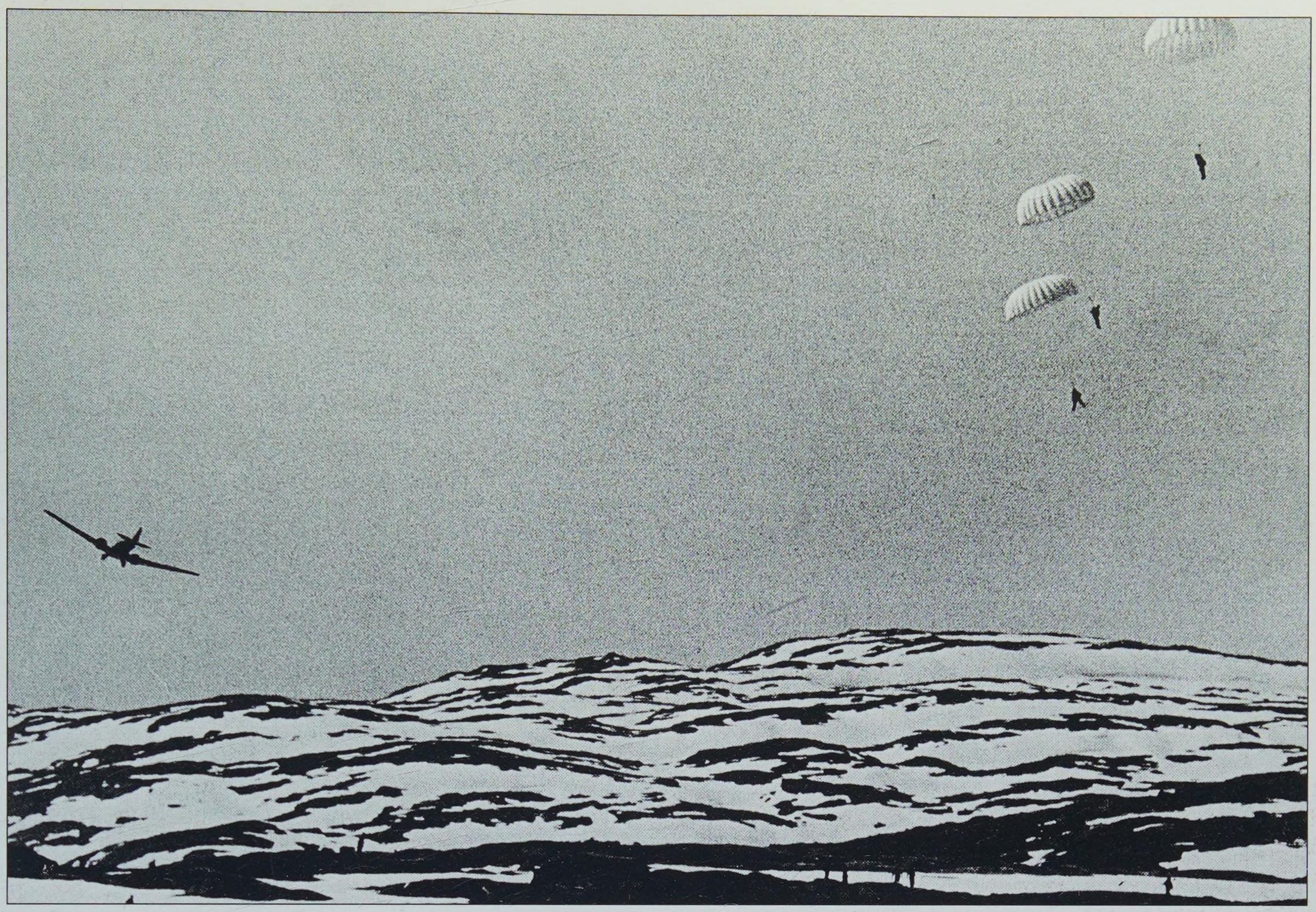
would give the *Luftwaffe* the operational radius it required for further European campaigns

These tasks were given to I./FJR 1, now under the command of Hauptmann Walther, with two objectives in Norway and two in Denmark. In Denmark, Hauptmann Gericke's No.4 Company performed the paratroopers' first combat drops, parachuting near to their targets: the bridge at Stoerstrom, linking the islands of Falster and Seeland (which provided a through-route to Copenhagen), and Aalborg Airport. Both were seized quickly, the surprise of the bridge's defenders being so complete that they surrendered without a fight. Such was the efficiency of the operations that Gericke received an Iron Cross 2nd Class for his conduct.

The Norwegian operations produced a great deal more resistance than that encountered in Denmark. No.3 Company, commanded by Leutnant von Brandis, had as its objective the capture of the airfield at Stavenger-Sola. The first obstacle to overcome was the terrible weather – only at the last minute did the skies become sufficiently clear to allow them to make the jump. The Germans met with some light ground fire during the drop and discovered several pockets of obdurate resistance around the airfield. Initially, the weight of fire coming against them stopped the paratroopers from retrieving their weapons' containers, but they overcame the situation and once the opposition was defeated, further Junkers Ju-52 transporters brought in reinforcements and the airfield was secured. Severe weather also caused problems for the HQ

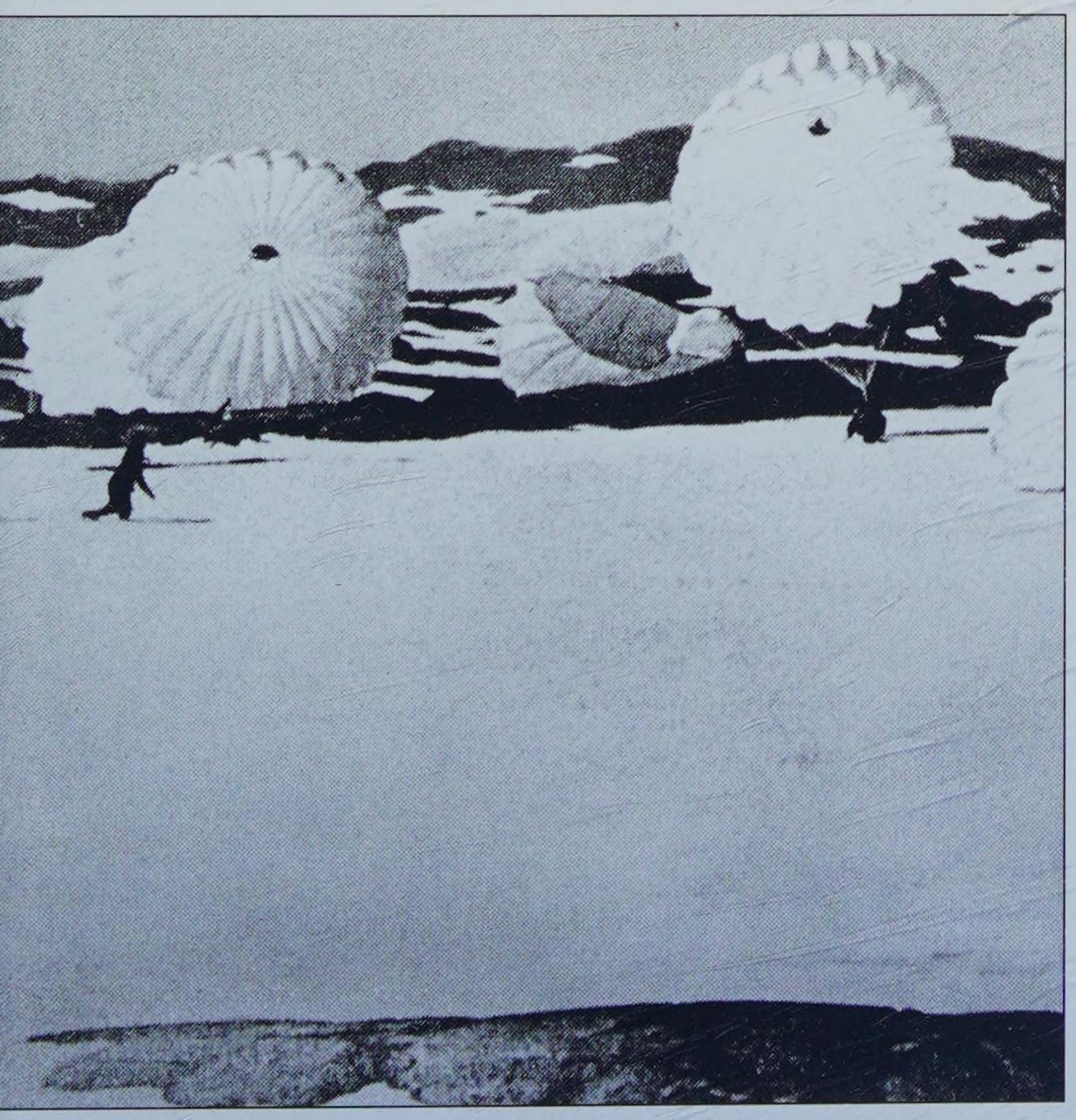
***Left:** A deployment near Narvik on 30 May 1940. FJR 1 made up the bulk of reinforcement drops around the port, but by the beginning of June the Allied stranglehold on Dietl's 2000 men trapped there was being broken by German victories elsewhere.*

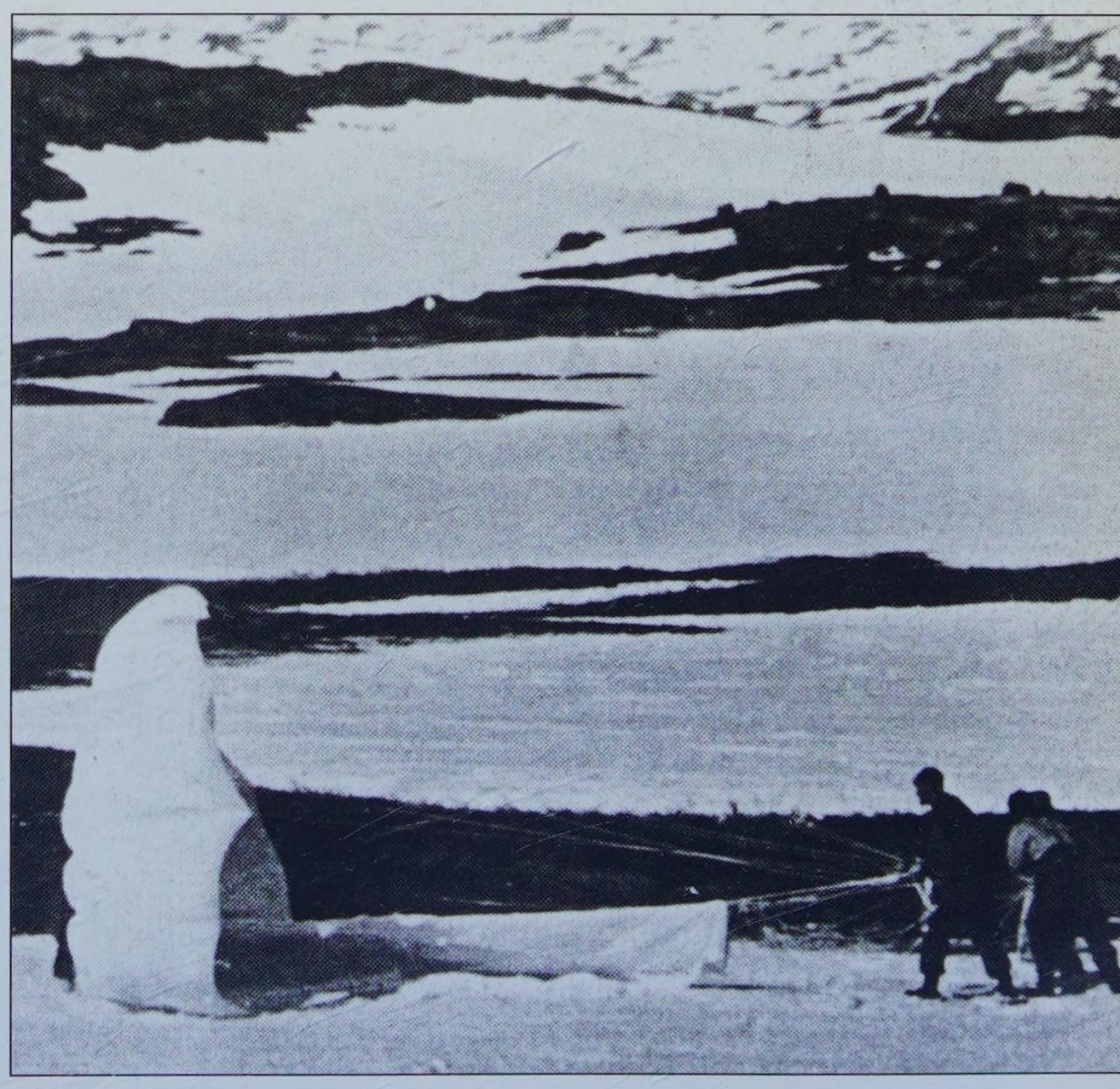
***Right:** Men collect their parachutes in the snow around Narvik. Although it could soften a landing, snow made the paratroopers conspicious in their grey smocks. White winter uniforms were only introduced during the Russian and Ardennes campaigns.*



Above: *A Junkers Ju-52 unloads its consignment of paratroopers around Narvik. Bad weather, navigational errors and ground fire severely affected airborne missions in Norway: during the Gudbrandsal Valley drops half the Ju-52s were put out of action.*

Below: *Paratroopers destined for Narvik touch down on 3 June 1940. Limited action was encountered at the outskirts on 8 June, but the city was easily occupied due to the evacuation of French and British troops from Norway in early June.*





Above: Fallschirmjäger *gather shortly before their deployment to Narvik in late May 1940. Poor weather conditions meant that reinforcements took nearly two weeks to reach full strength around the city, by which time the Allies were in retreat.*

Below: *A knocked-out bunker at Eben Emael. Despite the expense of its construction, the* Fallschirmjäger *showed how vulnerable immobile emplacements could be against elite troops armed with explosives and flame-throwers (note the smoke trails).*

Above: *Winners of the Knight's Cross for their leadership at Eben Emael (top to bottom, left to right): Hauptmanns Zierach, Altmann and Kiess; Hauptmann Witzig, Major Koch and Stabsarzt Dr Jäger; and Oberleutnants Ringel, Delica and Meissner.*

and Hauptmann Walther's No.2 Company, whose objective was the airbase at Oslo-Fornebu. The fog blanketing the aerodrome actually prohibited them from making the drop. Thus when Ju-52s carrying men of the 163rd Infantry Division landed as intended reinforcements, they were heavily opposed. No.2 Company was finally able to put down and, working with the 163rd Infantry Division, were eventually able to secure the airfield.

These early operations into Denmark and Norway brought the *Fallschirmjäger* its first taste of victory, but also of defeat. On 14 April No.1 Company, commanded by Leutnant Herbert Schmidt, was parachuted into the Gudbrandsal Valley, near Dombas. Their aim was to relieve pressure from General Dietl's 2000 men occupying Narvik, who were now threatened by a British advance from Aandalsnes, by stopping Norwegian troops linking up with the British forces.

The parachute drop took place in yet more bad weather and into deep snow. Many men were killed by being forced to jump too low, others were dropped off course, and a number of the Ju-52s were shot down by enemy anti-aircraft fire. From the very moment they disembarked they were faced by heavy Norwegian resistance which, over the course of four days, led to many German paratroopers being killed or wounded and the remainder suffering from fatigue and lack of supplies. Despite being severely wounded himself, Schmidt held the command together before bowing to the inevitable and surrendering.

Below: *Leutnant Witzig in May 1940 after he led the assault troops against Eben Emael. The courage and intelligence he demonstrated during the battle brought him the Knight's Cross and also a subsequent promotion to Hauptmann.*

The defeat at the Gudbrandsal Valley was more indicative of courage than failure, and the *Fallschirmjäger*'s performance overall in Denmark and Norway started to confirm its status as an elite fighting force. Yet the actions that would follow in Belgium and Holland would take that status to a near legendary level.

Into the maelstrom: the Low Countries

Even before the invasion of Poland, Hitler had conceived of some defining actions for the young airborne division. In particular, he envisaged two pivotal operations in the forthcoming invasion of Belgium and Holland. In Belgium, the paratroopers would be tasked with the destruction of the Reduit National, a string of heavily armoured forts sets along the Belgian frontier. In the Netherlands, the objective would be the capture or destruction of the nation's high command, located at The Hague. Alongside these objectives would be the seizure of several vital bridges within the territories.

The operations in Belgium would present an immense and risky challenge to the 7th Air Division and the 22nd Airlanding Division, the units chosen for the missions. Perhaps the most dangerous duty for the paratroopers was the neutralisation of Eben Emael, a fortress recently constructed in Liège and claimed at the time as the most formidable fortification in the world.

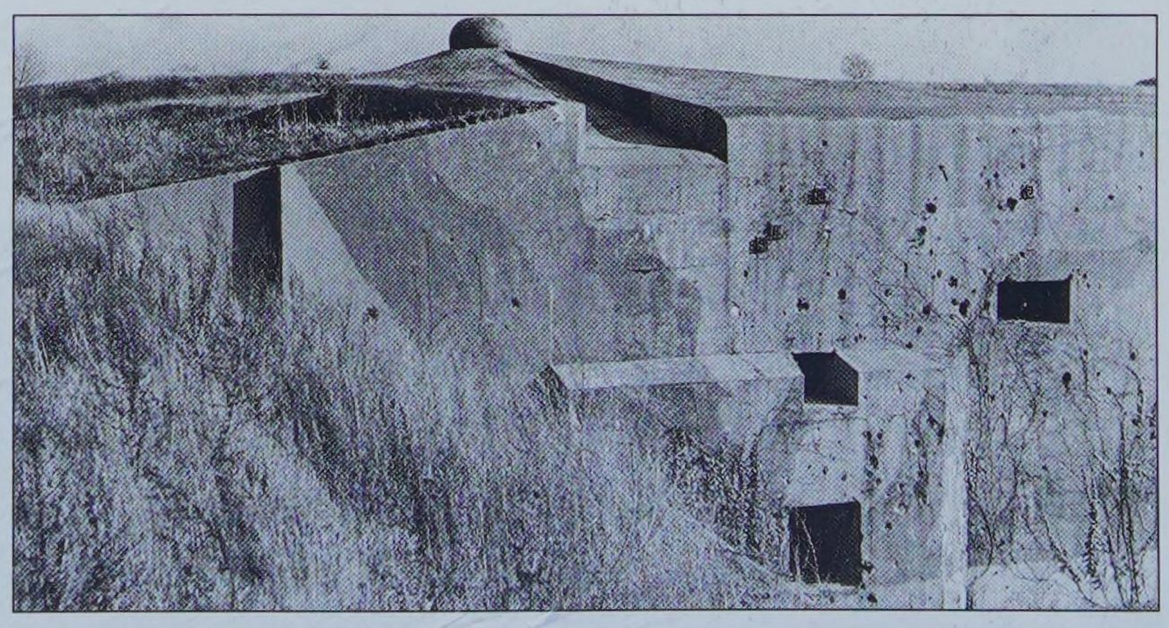
Eben Emael was set 45m (150ft) up on the west bank of the Albert Canal which ran parallel to the River Maas. It was protected not only by its garrison of 2000 men, but also by a mass of anti-tank ditches, pillboxes, multiple anti-aircraft machine-guns and large cupolas containing retractable heavy artillery. The northeastern side of the fortress gave onto a 40m (130ft) drop directly into the canal, while the often-flooded ground to the northwest provided another natural obstacle. The fort itself was a labyrinth of tunnels and rooms which pushed deep underground.

To capture Eben Emael, and three vital bridges in the vicinity, a special unit was formed called the *Sturmabteilung Koch* (Assault Group Koch), named after its resilient commander, Hauptmann Walter Koch. It was assembled in November 1939 and consisted of No.1 Company, I./FJR 1, the pioneer company of II./FJR 1, and a glider group. In total, the group numbered around 500 men.

For the action in Belgium the unit was split into four sections, each with a distinct responsibility and title: 'Concrete' (Leutnant Schacht), 'Steel' (Leutnant Altmann) and 'Iron' (Leutnant Schächter) had as their objectives the Vroenhoven, Veldvezelt and Canne bridges respectively; 'Granite' section, led by Leutnant Witzig, had the primary task of the capture of Eben Emael – yet such was the confidence in the *Fallschirmjäger's* abilities that the numbers of them assigned specifically to seize this military monster came to only 83 men and two officers.

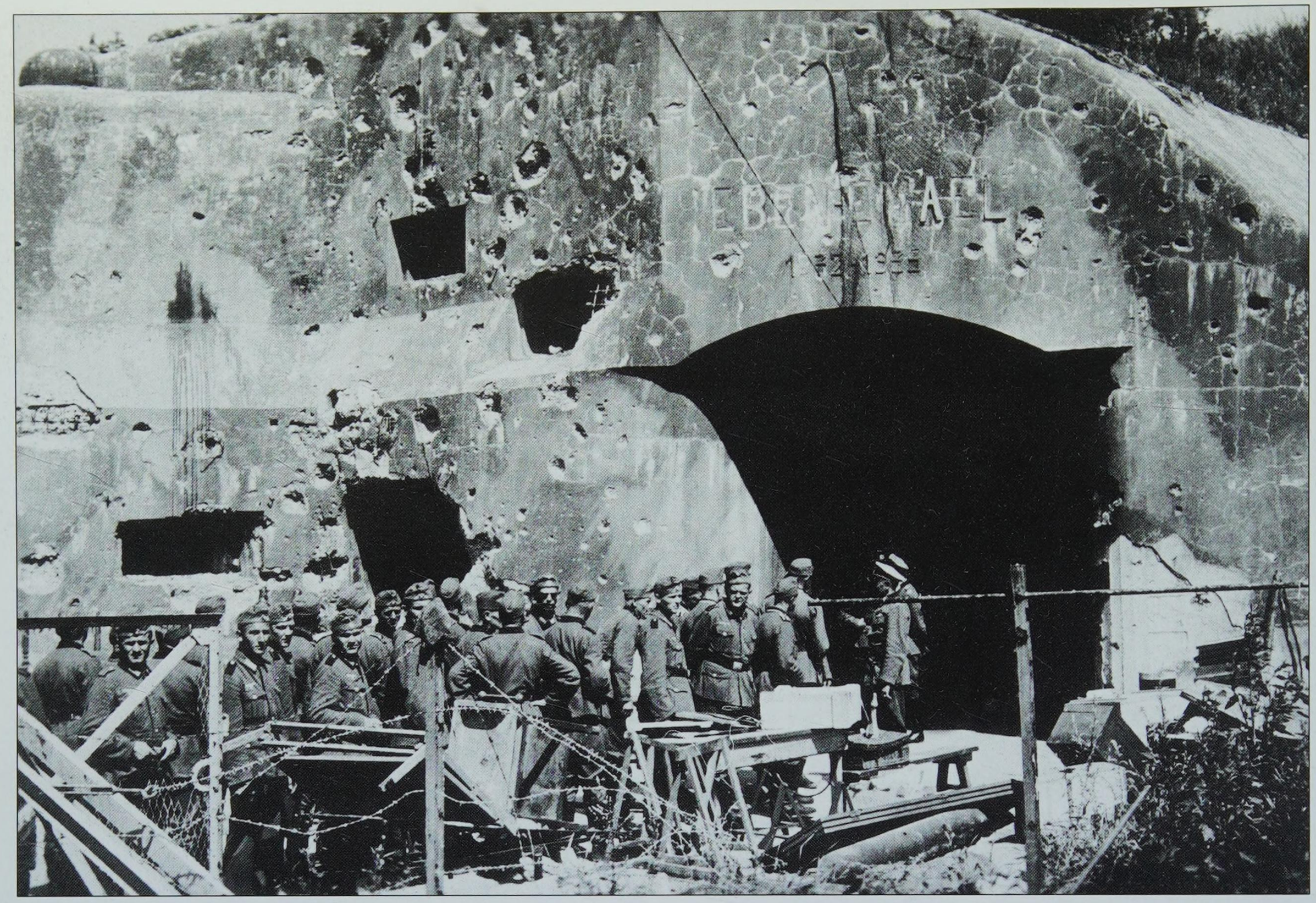
***Above:** The defence provided to Eben Emael by the high banks of the Albert Canal is especially evident in this image – though it was of most use against overland attack rather than paratroopers.*

***Above:** **Fallschirmjäger** celebrate the victory at Eben Emael upon returning to barracks in Germany. Both pilots and paratroopers had practised their assault manoeuvres many times on a mock-up of the fortress at Hidelsheim prior to the real attack.*



***Left:** A **Fallschirmjäger** pioneer platoon use rubber inflatable boats to cross the Albert Canal during the battle of Eben Emael. Such boats were used primarily to transport the flame-throwers and heavier demolition charges to the troops assaulting the fort.*

***Above:** Bullet and shrapnel holes pit the walls of a captured emplacement at Eben Emael. Linking such buildings with the rest of the labyrinthine fortress complex were some 4.5km (2.7 miles) of corridors, stairs and trenches.*



The operational success of these units depended almost entirely upon surprise, so their intensive training was conducted under strict conditions of secrecy – even insignia and badges were removed at times to confuse enemy intelligence. Yet the actual day was soon upon them, and at 0430 on 10 May 1940, Assault Group Koch took to the air in 11 gliders and headed for Belgium.

The paratroopers' operations at Eben Emael used glider deployment instead of parachute drops. Leaving their tows at a distance of about 18km (11 miles), the gliders' silence meant that the defenders were not alerted by engine noises. The gliders also gave greater directional control than a parachute drop, a vital factor as the aircraft were actually aiming to land on the fortress's roof, which was only 900 by 700m (2950 by 2510ft).

Each distinct section went into battle almost simultaneously (which should be remembered in the following narrative). In the taking of the bridges, the first unit to touch down was Concrete section, landing at Vroenhoven at 0515 short of one glider, which had been shot down by Belgian anti-aircraft fire. The men disgorged from the gliders close to the bridge and in a short, violent action a group of men, led by Gefreiter Stenzel, forcibly took the pillbox containing the demolition control centre for the bridge. The bridge secured, Leutnant Schacht's men then had to withstand repeated Belgian counter-attacks. The situation looked precarious until they were reinforced by a section of machine-gunners at 0615, and much later by an infantry battalion at 2140.

***Above:** The enormous scale of the emplacements at Eben Emael is evident when compared to the German soldiers undertaking a post-battle tour of the site. The barbed wire surrounding many of the emplacements was obviated by the use of Bangalore torpedoes, after which explosives were put into any aperture available, from observation periscopes to gun barrels.*

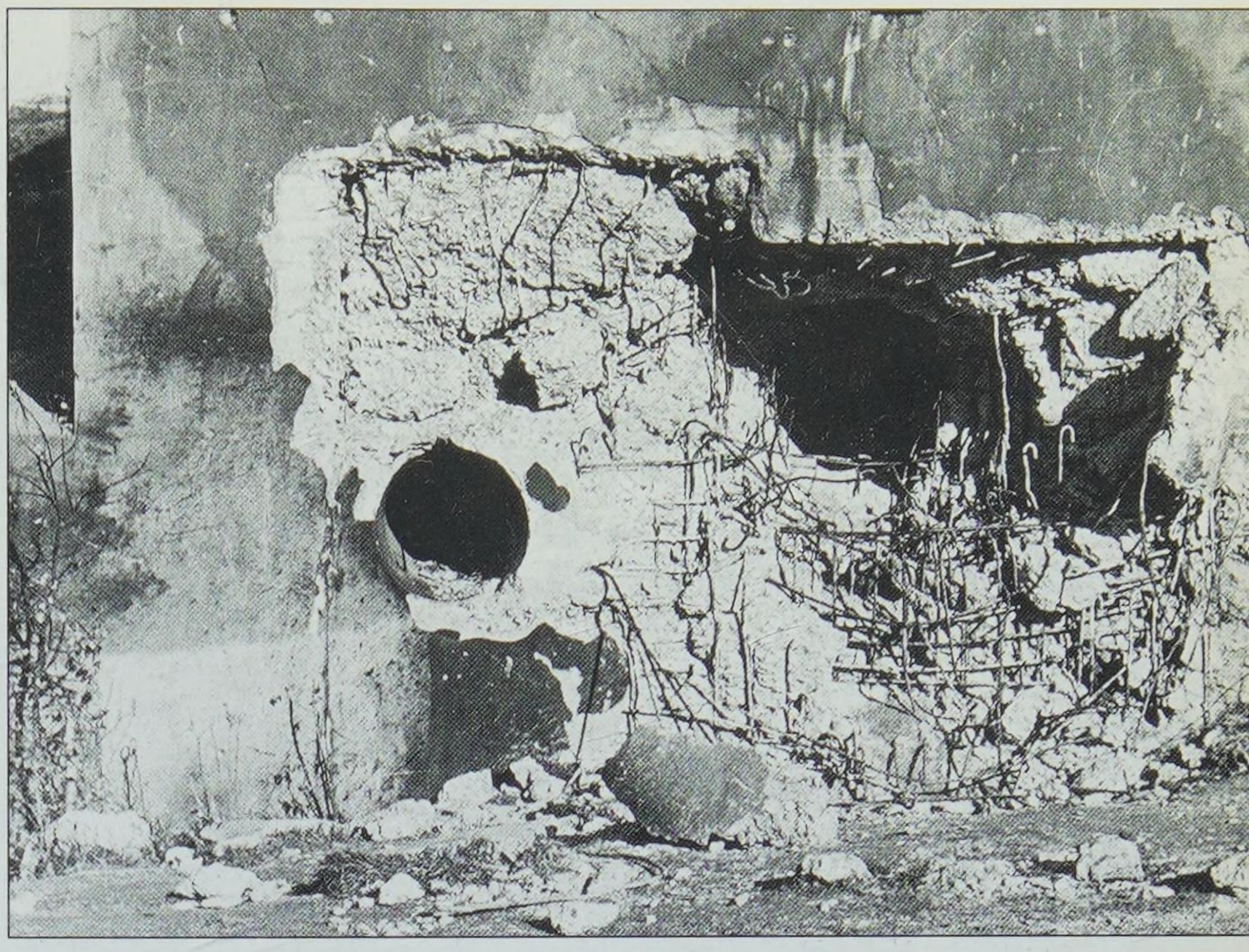
Steel section landed on their target at 0520. The accuracy of the glider landings, virtually on top of the Belgian positions, immediately put the paratroopers under very heavy fire. They fought through this, using explosives and grenades against the bridge's key pillbox and physically disconnected the demolition charges on the bridge's superstructure. Like Concrete, Steel section had to resist major counter-attacks and localised artillery fire, but they were finally relieved by advancing German forces at 2130.

Iron section had the most problematic operation of all of the three bridge units. As the gliders approached the target, the latter suddenly disintegrated in a huge explosion – a German ground unit ahead of schedule had panicked the Belgian defenders. The section was still obliged to land, however, and did so through anti-aircraft fire so ferocious that it left only six surviving planes. The German troops that remained after this setback performed well and they overcame Belgian resistance and counter-attacks (with the useful support of Ju-87 Stuka dive-bombers) until they were relieved at 2330.

Eben Emael

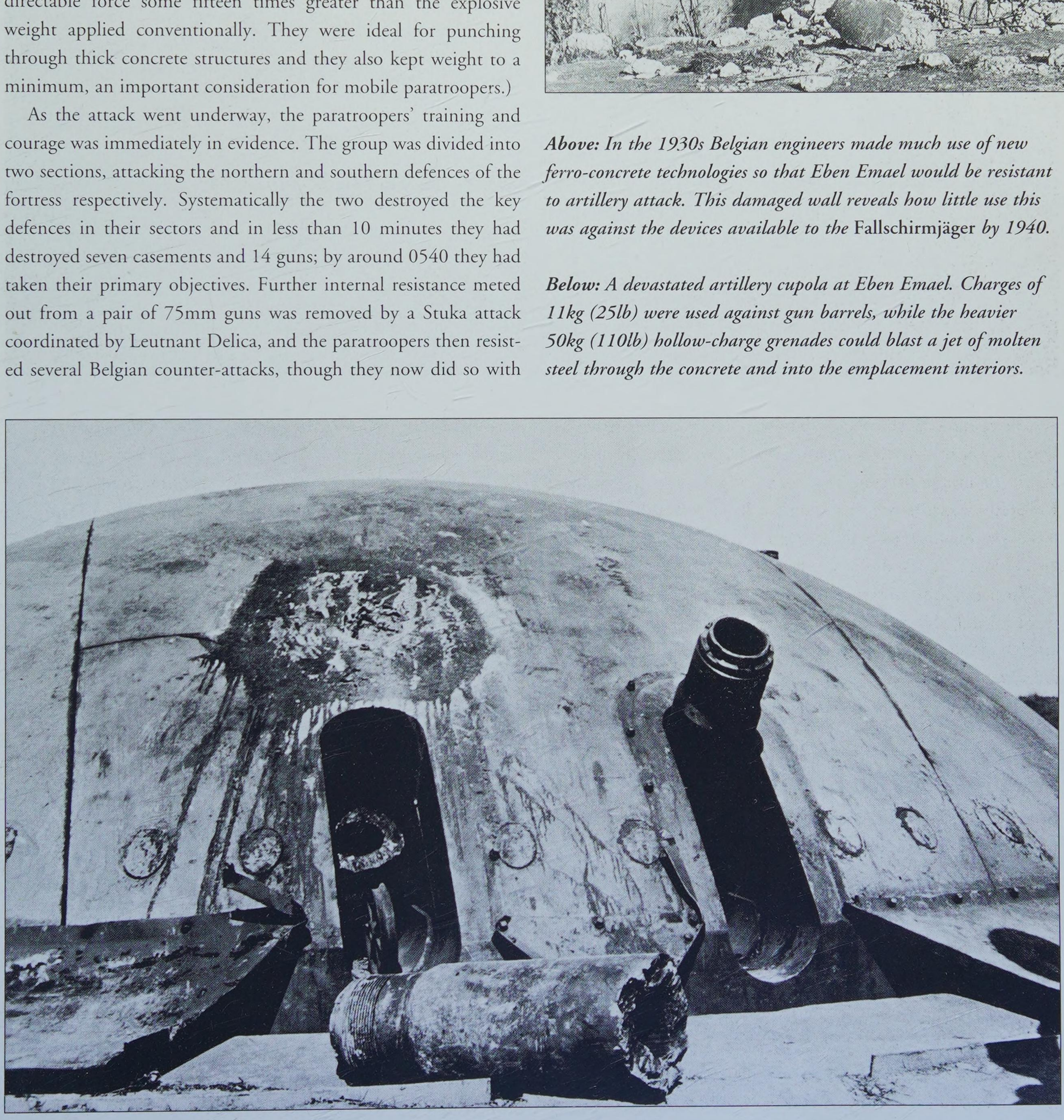
The attack on Eben Emael itself started at 0520 when the first gliders touched down on their precarious landing zone. Two gliders had not made it to the fortress owing to snapped tow cables, one of them being Witzig's plane. So, under the temporary command of Oberfeldwebel Wenzel, the *Fallschirmjäger* went into action against the artillery casements and pillboxes with flame throwers, 0.9kg, 11.3kg and 50kg (2lb, 25lb and 110lb) demolition charges and 12.5kg and 50kg (27.5lb and 110lb) hollow-charge grenades. (Hollow-charge grenades were constructed by moulding the explosive around a cone which left a hollow centre. The increased shockwave generated by this design gave a directable force some fifteen times greater than the explosive weight applied conventionally. They were ideal for punching through thick concrete structures and they also kept weight to a minimum, an important consideration for mobile paratroopers.)

As the attack went underway, the paratroopers' training and courage was immediately in evidence. The group was divided into two sections, attacking the northern and southern defences of the fortress respectively. Systematically the two destroyed the key defences in their sectors and in less than 10 minutes they had destroyed seven casements and 14 guns; by around 0540 they had taken their primary objectives. Further internal resistance meted out from a pair of 75mm guns was removed by a Stuka attack coordinated by Leutnant Delica, and the paratroopers then resist-



Above: *In the 1930s Belgian engineers made much use of new ferro-concrete technologies so that Eben Emael would be resistant to artillery attack. This damaged wall reveals how little use this was against the devices available to the* Fallschirmjäger *by 1940.*

Below: *A devastated artillery cupola at Eben Emael. Charges of 11kg (25lb) were used against gun barrels, while the heavier 50kg (110lb) hollow-charge grenades could blast a jet of molten steel through the concrete and into the emplacement interiors.*



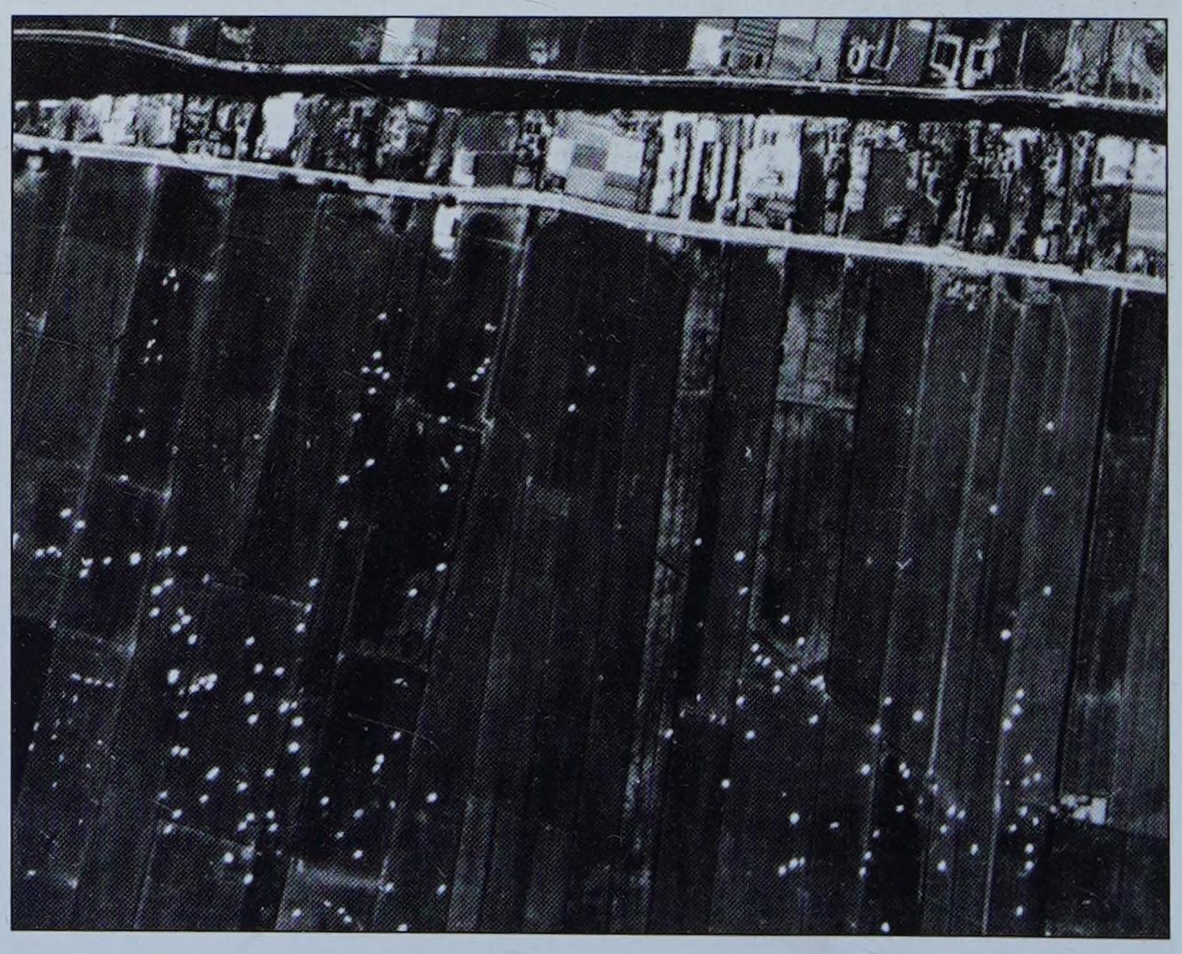
Witzig back in their midst (on landing back in Germany he had immediately acquired another tow which delivered him back to the battlefield at 0830). Despite several areas of the fortress remaining unsecured, the paratroopers held on through the night until they were relieved by an engineer battalion on the morning of 11 May.

The destruction visited on the Belgian forces at Eben Emael by the German paratroopers was as ferocious as it was efficient. Seemingly impregnable artillery positions now lay demolished, holes punched in their sides by the hollow-charge grenades. The paratroopers had lost only six killed and 20 wounded – incredible statistics when considering the scale and potential of their objective. The other sections had suffered more casualties, but as a whole the *Fallschirmjäger* operations in Belgium had proved the value of elite skills when used in rapid commando-style raids and incisive localised attacks.

Battle for the Netherlands

The paratroopers' objectives in the Netherlands were key airfields and bridges mainly sited within 'Fortress Holland' – the well-defended area of the country which contained the cities of Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam and Dordrecht. These objectives were given to the 7th Air Division in its entirety (apart from those elements in Belgium). Yet the 7th was not operating on its own, as it was now combined with the 22nd Airlanding Division

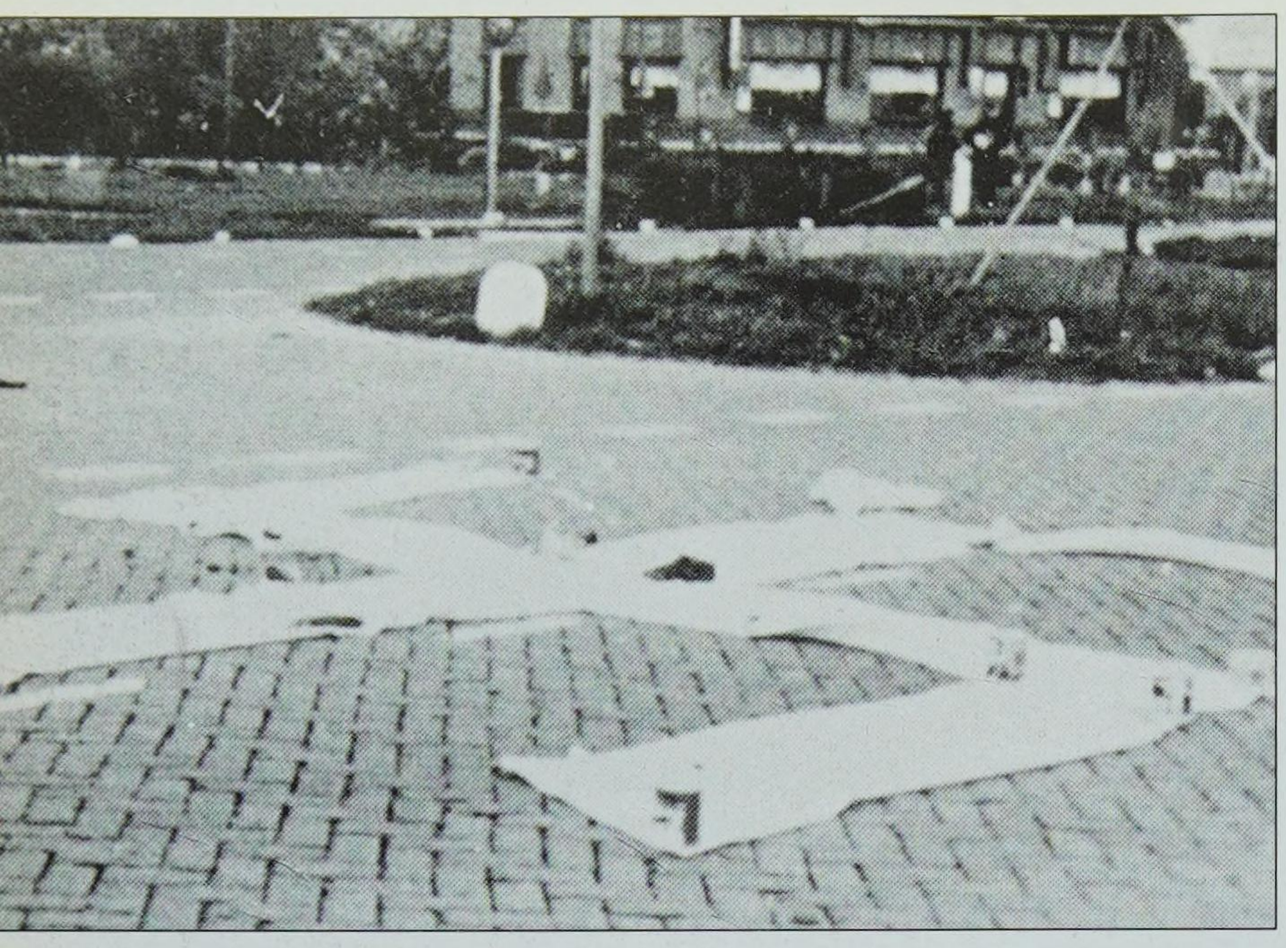
Above: *The first of a stick of paratroopers leaves a Ju-52 over the flat countryside of the Netherlands. The* **Fallschirmjäger** *contingent was four times greater than that used in Belgium and would test the paratroopers as a large-scale strategic unit.*



Above: **Fallschirmjäger** *parachutes litter a drop zone during the Netherlands invasion. Over 2000 troops of the 7th Air Division were deployed, while 12,000 troops of the 22nd Airlanding Division followed in Ju-52 transporters.*

Above: *Paratroopers assemble during the Netherlands invasion under protection from a tripod-mounted MG34 machine-gun. These men seem to have all their equipment, but many of the bridge assault units had their supply containers scattered well away from the designated drop zone.*

Right: *A three-man* Fallschirmjäger *machine-gun team in a position to provide covering fire. This was vital during the airport operations and was also essential to the establishment of defensive positions around the captured bridges.*



***Above:** At the Moerdijk bridge, paratroopers used cloth to make the pattern of a swastika on the ground. This informed* Luftwaffe *pilots that the area has been captured. Earlier, German aircraft had subjected Moerdijk's Dutch defences to heavy bombardment.*

***Above:** Paratroopers man defensive positions in readiness for a Dutch counter-attack. The Moerdijk rail bridge was a vital target, for it allowed the passage of freight across the River Maas and formed a primary rail link between Dordrecht and Antwerp.*

composed of the 47th, 16th and 65th infantry regiments under the command of General von Sponek. The 22nd's main objective was the elimination of the Dutch high command at The Hague, and taken as a whole the number of airborne troops deployed in the Netherlands would be around 14,000.

The bridges in question were at Moerdijk and Dordrecht and were assigned to II./FJR 1 and I./FJR 1 respectively, while III./FJR 1 was to take the airfield at Waalhaven, and the newly formed FJR 2 (at this time only six companies strong), along with the 47th Infantry Regiment, had airfields at Valkenburg, Ockenburg, Waalhaven (II./FJR 2 would be airlanded after its capture) and Yprenburg as their main objectives.

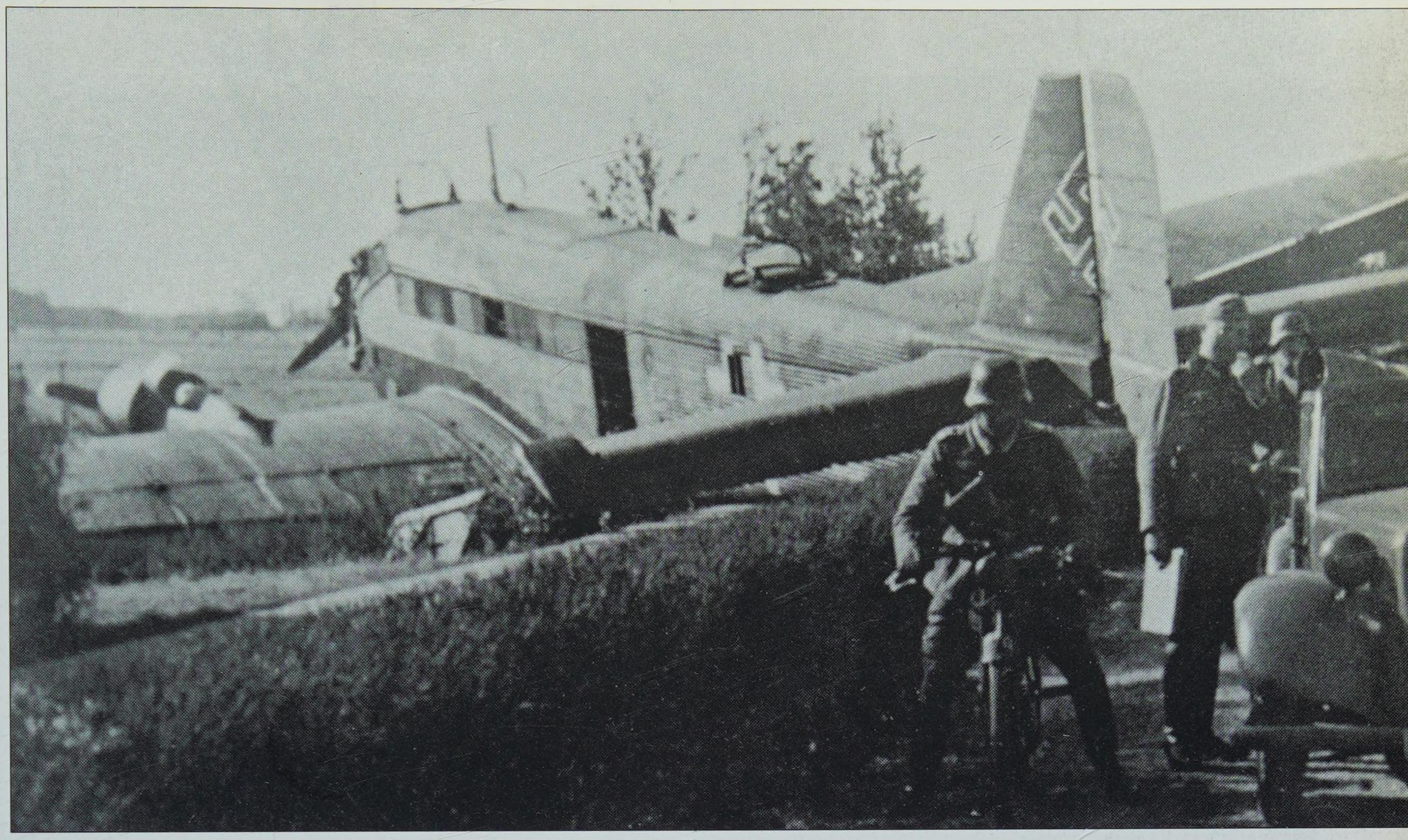
Again, operations began on 10 May and, despite the Dutch forces having been forewarned of the invasion, both bridges were successfully taken in rapid parachute drops, though the paratroopers of I./FJR 1 storming the bridge at Dordrecht suffered some heavy casualties from vigorous Dutch fire.

The airfield operations went somewhat less smoothly. Hauptmann Schultz's men at Waalhaven soon found themselves locked in heavy combat with the Dutch defenders, and it became a struggle to secure the airfield buildings for the incoming reinforcements (65th and 16th infantry regiments). However, this was eventually accomplished with the aid of heavy *Luftwaffe* bombing and the airfield was soon open for reinforcements in the form of II./FJR 2 and *Geschütz-Batterie* 7. The units added anti-tank, anti-aircraft and artillery support, though the anti-tank unit with its 3.7cm *Pak* guns proved to be an unwieldy force when on the ground due to inadequate towing facilities. These reinforcements headed off to the battle lines at Rotterdam, Moerdijk and Dordrecht, where the paratroopers were reeling from especially dangerous and insistent Dutch counter-attacks using elite units such as the light division.

The operation against the airfield at Valkenburg came upon an unusual problem. Although the paratroopers quickly occupied the area, the runway itself was found to be too soft for the Ju-52s and their cargo of men from the 47th Infantry Regiment. The resulting congestion and the very heavy Dutch resistance meant that the attack on The Hague had to be called off – yet another disappointment for the 22nd Airlanding Division, which on the whole enjoyed little success in the Netherlands' operations when compared to the parachute regiments.

***Right, top:** A crashed Ju-52 aircraft on the main highway between The Hague and the port of Rotterdam. Dutch defenders at Yprenburg possessed substantial anti-aircraft defences and had strewn obstructions across the runway. Thus many transporters diverted to the motorways, but these were very often equally well covered by Dutch defensive firepower.*

***Right:** German paratroopers storm the Moerdijk bridge during the initial assaults on 10 May 1940. Although expertly taken, Dutch counter-attacks threatened the German positions until 13/14 May when the 9th* Panzer Division *reached the area.*



Below: *Paratrooper engineers scale the pylons at Moerdijk to defuse Dutch demolition charges. The fact that the paratroopers lost none of the vital bridges they were assigned to capture shows the skill and rapidity with which they executed their attacks.*

Above: *Paratroopers advance across the Moerdijk bridge covered by an MG34 team. After the seizure of a pillbox at the northern end of the bridge, Leutnant Tietjen led a 'storm assault' which resulted in his being awarded the Knight's Cross.*

The actual capture of the primary objectives was only the beginning of the *Fallschirmjäger*'s tribulations in the Netherlands. Pre-alerted Dutch fighters put up a level of resistance which had not been seen in Belgium, and the paratroopers' main relief force, the 18th Army, was not able to join them until 13 May owing to the severity of fighting which it itself had to face.

The performance of the airborne units during the Dutch campaign was mixed, not in terms of courage but certainly in terms of efficiency. A particularly disastrous campaign was had by the fledgling 2nd Regiment, especially during the operations to capture the airfields at Valkenburg and Yprenburg, when they fell into the wrong drop zones and took heavy casualties because of it. FJR 2's operations at Ockenburg had faced such fierce resistance that many of the Ju-52s carrying 22nd Airlanding Division reinforcements were destroyed or had to flee as soon as they touched down – another reason for the attack on The Hague being called off; effective resistance was a problem that the 22nd Airlanding

Above: Fallschirmjäger *lead away POWs after capturing Moerdijk bridge. Although the initial assault was rapid, Dutch motorised and armoured units kept up counter-attacks for days and took many positions between Moerdijk and Dordrecht.*

Right: *Göring decorates some of the officers who distinguished themselves at Rotterdam and Moerdijk during the invasion of the Netherlands. From left to right, Oberst Bräuer, Hauptmann Prager, Oberstleutnant Kershin and Oberst Kreysing.*

Division faced elsewhere, as many of its aircraft had to put down on exposed motorways because designated airfields were not secure, at which point most were shot up by Dutch infantry and artillery fire.

Yet despite all this, the airborne troops would still prove their worth in one of the original roles for which they were conceived. The disruption they created behind the Dutch lines was considerable, and, naturally enough, once France had fallen the paratroopers found themselves preparing for a leading role in the invasion of Britain – Operation *Seeloewe* (Sealion). For this it was planned to use the 7th Air and 22nd Airlanding divisions to capture the airfield at Lympne in a two-wave encirclement operation prior to the main landing of German forces on the southeast coast of England. Once the airfield was captured, then the 22nd Airlanding Division would be flown in as reinforcements and the airfield would be used to launch German fighter missions. There was much concern, however, over how long the paratroopers would have to fight without support, and the fact that Operation Sealion did not go ahead was perhaps something of a blessing for the airborne troops, especially as they still had to make good their losses from campaigns on the European mainland. Yet even though the operation to invade Britain was cancelled, the *Fallschirmjäger* would not have to wait long before being back in combat, this time on the island of Crete – a mission that would totally change its application during the rest of the war.

CHAPTER 4

CRETE

Although a German victory and one of the greatest airborne operations in history, the battle for Crete inflicted such losses on the paratroopers that large-scale airborne assaults would never again be performed.

Left: *A Ju-52 transporter goes down over northern Crete. Prior to the invasion, German intelligence had badly underestimated the number of anti-aircraft guns available to the Allies on Crete.*

Above: Fallschirmjäger *garlanded with flowers after the capture of Crete. Although the battles were hugely costly the operation was still used for maximum propaganda effect in Germany.*

The German invasion of the island of Crete in May 1941 stands as possibly the defining action of the *Fallschirmjäger* in World War II. In a series of operations as daring as they were bloody, the German airborne forces performed what would be its last strategic parachute and glider deployment of the war. After Crete, with the exception of one or two local airborne actions, the *Fallschirmjäger* would find itself applied purely as conventional ground troops.

The Corinth Canal

Since the battles to conquer western Europe, the *Fallschirmjäger* had undergone several major structural changes. A new regiment had been created, FJR 3, and the 7th Air and the 22nd Airlanding divisions had been combined by an OKW directive into the XI *Fliegerkorps*. In addition, Hauptmann Koch's unit, now famous in the wake of the Belgium operations, was officially designated an 'assault regiment' – *Fallschirmjäger-Sturmregiment*.

Above: *Paratroopers make their preparations for the assault against the bridge over the Corinth Canal. Prior to the attack, the troops of FJR 2 were based in Plovdiv in Bulgaria and had been destined for an (aborted) airborne attack on Lemnos. Hitler himself ordered the Corinth mission on 20 April 1941.*

Right: *The advance over the Corinth Canal bridge shortly before its destruction. Sources argue about how the bridge's demolition explosives were detonated, attributing it variously to a stray bofors round, two British officers on the bridge, or Allied snipers.*

Below: *Streetfighting in Corinth. While one man fires his MP40 around a corner his colleague prepares a stick grenade ready for throwing. The 63 dead incurred by the* Fallschirmjäger *during this operation included the cameraman who took this image.*

***Above:** British prisoners raise their hands to* **Fallschirmjäger** *in Corinth town. Despite the destruction of the bridge, there were successes. FJR 2 captured 12,000 Commonwealth and Greek soldiers attempting to reach the Peloponnese and repairs to the bridge quickly opened it up again to German military traffic.*

It was in this reorganised state that the German airborne force had its first experience of combat in Greece and its islands. German armoured and air forces had attacked Greece in April 1941, and by the end of the month the Empire Expeditionary Force of the Allies was fast retreating down the Greek peninsula. One of its few escape routes was across the Corinth Canal and into the Peloponnese, or more specifically across a single bridge that crossed the canal in the Isthmus of Corinth. It was the job of FJR 2 to get there before the Allies, capture the bridge, and hold it for use by the German forces so that the Allies could be pursued further into the Greek mainland.

The attack itself went in at 0500 on 26 April, the plan being to land 54 paratrooper engineers to the north and south of the bridge who would capture it and allow the landing of the first and second battalions of FJR 2. These soldiers would then secure the area. The operation was not to be the success that was hoped for. German Gotha DFS-230 gliders flew in through extremely heavy ground fire and touched down with considerable accuracy, one plane actually being lost from skidding into the bridge itself. All demolition charges and guards were removed from the bridge by assault groups, yet during a British counter-attack the carelessly stacked pile of explosives was detonated (from causes unknown and much debated) and the bridge, huge chunks of the canal bank and many paratroopers disappeared in the resulting explosion. Other FJR 2 companies then parachuted in to reinforce the area, taking heavy casualties (one group of men from No.3 Company was dropped into the sea where they all drowned) but managing to capture British anti-aircraft positions and forcing the surrender of the local town. Total casualties for the *Fallschirmjäger* stretched to 63 killed and 174 wounded.

The operation on the Corinth Canal was the only major airborne action on the mainland of Greece, but it provided a salutary warning of the dangers of such deployment in the local terrain against a capable enemy. Unfortunately for the *Fallschirmjäger*, Crete was to reinforce that lesson to a much higher degree.

Operation Merkur

Crete was a vital geographic objective in Germany's overall war strategy in the southern theatre. To leave it unchecked would allow the Allies to retain invaluable airbases from which they could

bomb the Ploesti oilfields in Romania, which supplied over 50 per cent of Germany's crude oil. General Student had long had a vision of using his airborne forces in an 'island-hopping' role, systematically snatching territory in the Mediterranean and the Adriatic, and thus disrupting Allied shipping routes, supplies and operations right across to the Middle Eastern theatre. The German high command also realised there was an opportunity for a devastating application of airborne troops, and Student received his first objective at short notice – Crete itself.

The operation was codenamed *Merkur* (Mercury), and Student rapidly put together his attack plan. For the assault he would have his full airborne resources available, with one distinct exception. The 22nd Airlanding Division had been transferred to the Ploesti oilfields for guard duties, so Student received as a replacement 5.*Gebirgs-Division* (5th Mountain Division) under the command of Generalmajor Ringel – fine troops, but ones with no experience of airborne actions.

In spite of this drawback, the attack force developed into a particularly strong body of men which consisted of (with commanders): the *Luftlande-Sturm-Regiment* (LLStR), previously named *Fallschirmjäger-Sturmregiment* (Generalmajor Meindl); FJR 1, FJR 2 and FJR 3 (Generalleutnant Süssmann); 5.*Gebirgs-Division* (Generalmajor Ringel); XI *Fliegerkorps* troops (Student); plus a collection of other specialist battalions, including pioneer and light-artillery units.

***Above:** Airborne infantry units prior to their departure for Crete in May 1941. The fleet of aircraft mobilised for Operation* **Merkur** *(Mercury) was impressive: around 500 Ju-52 transport aircraft (as seen in the background) and 70 DFS-230 gliders.*

This force was to be directed against important airfields, bridges, hills and towns running across Crete's northern coastline. The separate units were divided up according to these objectives based on a plan that fell into two phases. The first wave of attack would be mounted by Battle Group West, consisting of Meindl's LLStR, and Battle Group Centre, made up of FJR 3 along with I./LLStR (under the command of Oberst Heidrich). Battle Group West's objectives were the airfield at Maleme and various roads, bridges and anti-aircraft positions around Canea, where the Allied HQ of New Zealander Major General Sir Bernard Freyberg was based. Battle Group Centre also shared some of the military objectives around Maleme and Canea but it would extend its attack further eastwards.

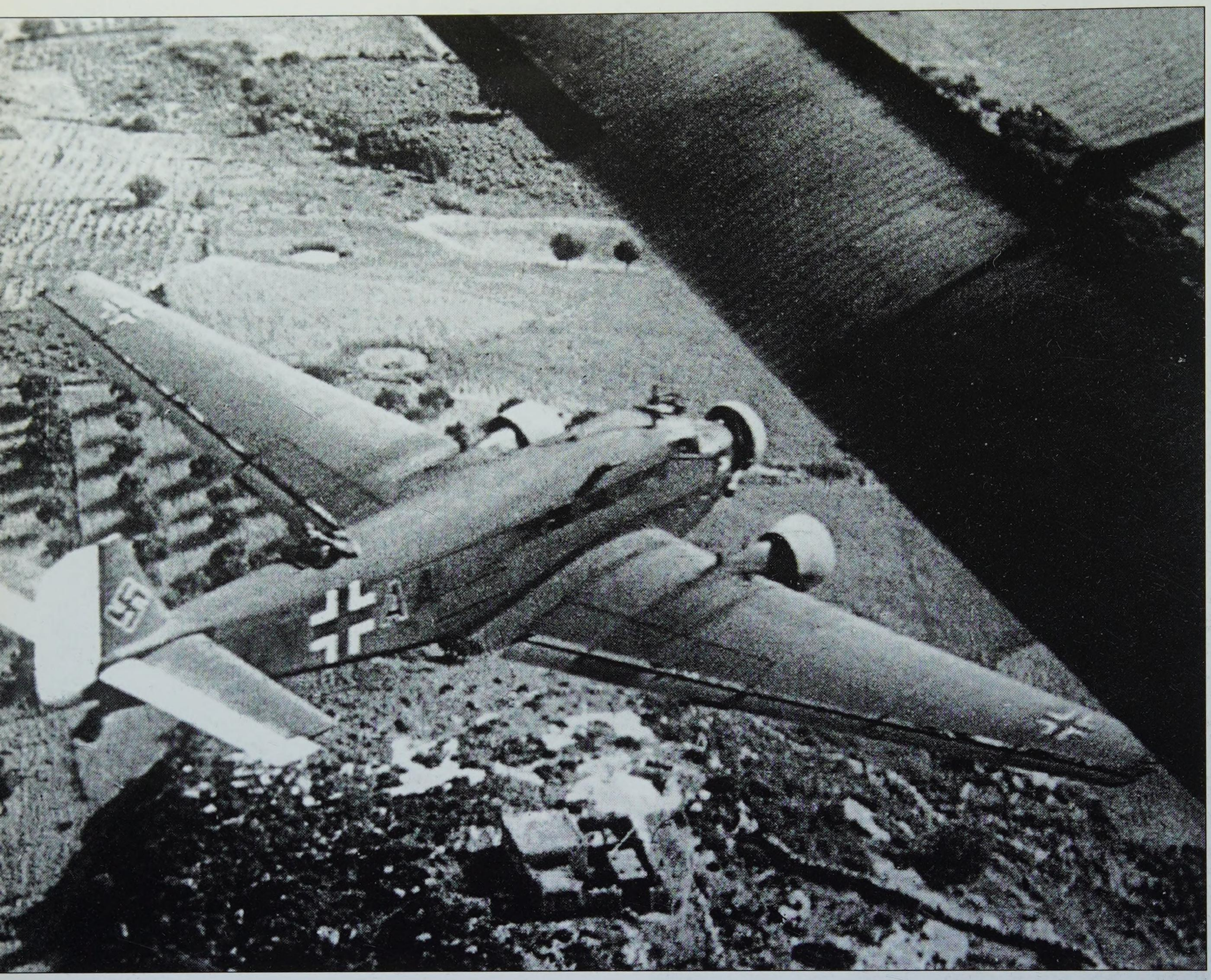
The planes which had deployed these first groups of men (by either parachute or glider) would then return to their bases at airfields such as Megara and Corinth and pick up the second wave consisting of FJR 1 and FJR 2. FJR 2 (Oberst Alfred Sturm) would also be part of Battle Group Centre and it was tasked with taking the airfield and town at Rethymnon (Retimo). FJR 1 would be deployed further down the coast against the airfield and town of

Above: *German paratroopers inside their transport aircraft on their way to Crete. Many were to die even before they reached their landing or drop zone. III./FJR 1, for instance, lost over 70 men to anti-aircraft fire before they had opened their parachutes.*

Left: *Four* Fallschirmjäger *Oberleutnants who received the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross for their bravery during the Crete action: (from left to right) Alfred Genz, K.H. Becker, Hagel and Toschka. Toschka died assaulting an AA battery.*

Heraklion – this would be classed as Battle Group East. Once the second wave had secured its objectives it was to be reinforced by a sea-landing of Ringel's troops, who would be transported from mainland Greece in requisitioned civilian vessels.

Prior to the action, there were some unseen factors that would have a terrible bearing on the outcome of Operation Mercury. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the Allies on Crete knew that the Germans were coming. The Ultra intercepts, their codes broken by equipment at Bletchley Park in England, meant the Allies had not only discovered the dates of the invasion but also the landing destinations. To compound these problems for the Germans, Freyberg had accurately positioned his troops at most of the designated drop zones. And finally, while British intelligence was performing wonders, the *Abwehr* let the German forces down by underestimating the Allied strength and assuming that most of the



Above: *Ju-52s approach their drop zones. The generally low altitude of deployment contributed to the high casualty rate, for although it kept time spent in the air to a minimum, it also made the aircraft more vulnerable to ground fire.*

Left: *Close formation flying by the German transport aircraft was essential to maintaining a tight drop pattern, and this was something that was not always achieved during the Crete operation when many units were left scattered and isolated.*

***Left:** Crete's rough terrain frequently caused injuries during parachute landing, while anti-aircraft fire forced some aircraft to increase their drop altitude, thus exposing the paratroopers to longer periods of ground fire while suspended in the air.*

men evacuated from the Greek mainland had gone to Egypt. The *Fallschirmjäger* would not discover the full implications of these facts until Operation Mercury began on 20 May 1941.

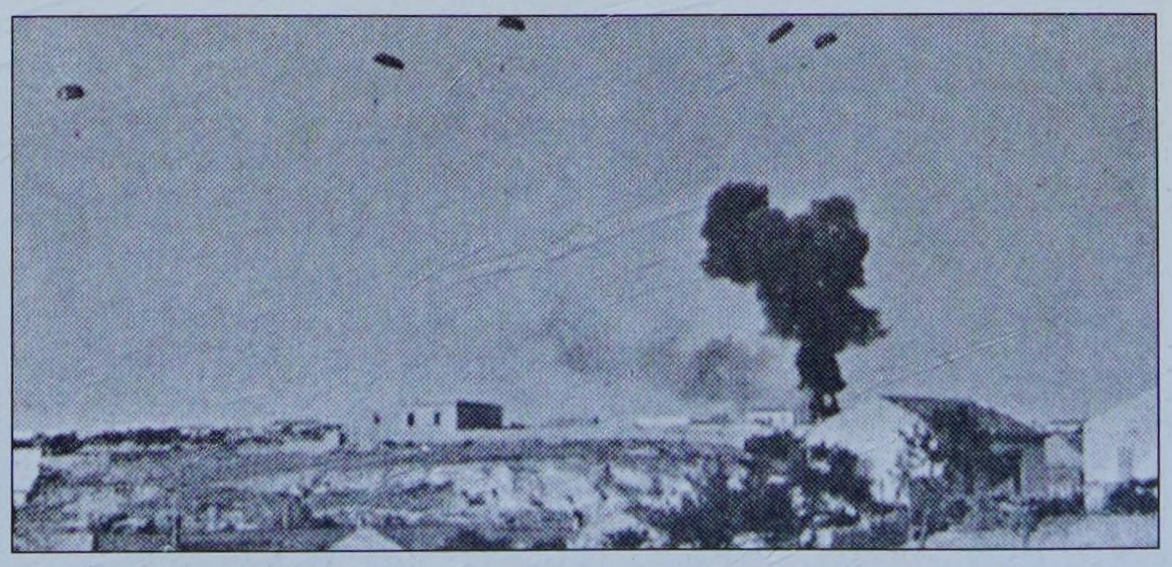
The first wave

Meindl's assault troops were the first to touch down on Cretan soil at 0700, most of them through a hideous storm of Allied machine-gun and anti-aircraft fire. Heavy casualties were taken almost instantly. I./LLStR, whose job it was to attack the Maleme airfield itself, found that its companies were scattered – all apart from No.3 Company had landed off course. The No.4 and HQ companies suffered a terrible 50 per cent strength reduction when they put down right in the middle of strong British positions. Major Koch himself was seriously wounded. The plight of No.4 Company meant that its intended action against Point 107, a hill overlooking the airfield and hosting Allied artillery observers, was severely compromised. Consequently, both No.4 Company and III./LLStR, which had now parachuted into the northeast of the airfield, were under serious shellfire in addition to blistering small-arms fire.

By the end of the first day Battle Group West had taken some key objectives, including anti-aircraft positions and the southern and western perimeter defences at Maleme. But the airfield remained a centre of dogged resistance, and nightfall would see the paratroopers digging-in with the expectation of counter-attacks. III./LLStR alone had suffered enormous casualties – some 400 dead out of 600 troops deployed. To make matters worse, Generalmajor Meindl had also been badly hurt.

Further down the coast, the other body of first-wave troops, FJR 3, was having little better luck in its attacks on Galatas, Canea and Suda Bay. The parachute drop by FJR 3's 3rd Battalion was particularly disastrous. No.10 Company landed right in the

***Below:** A dramatic sequence of three photographs showing the end of a Ju-52. In the first image (far left) men can be seen jumping from the plane. Eventually, it crashes into the brow of a hill as men from another aircraft descend into the drop zone.*



middle of major New Zealand positions and many of them were captured (one platoon managed to escape with some prisoners, but was later killed in an ambush). Two other companies dropped straight into other catastrophes: one (No.11) suffered high levels of injury when it landed in the mountains and another (No.12) was dropped straight into a reservoir, most of the troops drowning in their tangled parachutes. No.9 Company did make the right landing spot, but with support seriously diminished it was beaten into retreat during the fighting around Galatas.

FJR 3's 1st Battalion opened its part of the Cretan operation with considerably better luck. Its objective was to block the road running between Alikianon and Canea and then take the surrounding heights. It succeeded in capturing the Agya prison near the landing zone and turned it into a temporary HQ, but little progress was made towards Canea because of the quality of the Allied resistance.

Such was the situation encountered by the first wave in Student's great plan to take Crete. Casualty rates had been truly hideous, with many of the field commanders either killed or wounded, including the divisional commander Süssmann who died when his glider crashed on take-off at Aegina. The second wave was still to come.

***Above:** A shattered DFS-230 glider is inspected. The uneven and stony ground of Crete caused many glider crashes and subsequent loss of men by heightening the glider's tendency to inflict back and leg injuries with heavy landings.*

***Below:** A pall of smoke hangs over Suda Bay during the invasion. British warships concentrated in Suda Bay and added to the anti-aircraft fire directed against the paratroopers from the land. In turn, the British ships were pounded by Ju-87 Stuka attacks.*

Below: *At the height of the battle for Crete, General Student and officers gather around a map to decide on their strategy. After the battle, Student was despondent about his tactical choices and partly blamed himself for the high casualty figures.*

Above: *Paratroopers take cover behind a wall during the advance on Canea. Some 2460 paratroopers were used around Canea, the largest of the four major drop zones on the island (Heraklion came a close second with 2300 men deployed).*

Joining battle

The second wave of paratroopers heading for Crete suffered setbacks even before they took off. The turn-around time for refuelling nearly 500 Junkers Ju-52s proved to be too long, and thus, in their eagerness to join the battle, the companies of FJR 1 and FJR 2 departed in a piecemeal fashion rather than as one solid wave. In this condition FJR 2 (without the 2nd Battalion, which was accompanying FJR 1 to Heraklion) parachuted into Rethymnon airfield around 1400. Again, the whole principle of parachute deployment seemed to let the *Fallschirmjäger* down. One company was dropped off course, another's men sustained many injuries landing on a rocky surface typical of Crete, and two other companies were instantly pinned down by Allied fire the moment they landed. Despite the setbacks, FJR 2 was still able to take salient ground around the airfield but, like their companions at Maleme, by nightfall the airfield was still in Allied hands.

If anything, the experience of FJR 1 and II./FJR 2 was even more severe flying over Heraklion. II./FJR 1 was almost decimated by heavy anti-aircraft fire as it approached the airfield in its

***Above:** Heavily armed paratroopers move into the battle area. Because supplies were likely to be isolated, each man in airborne operations carried an above average amount of ammunition. The soldier is the centre has purpose-designed paratrooper bandoliers.*

***Above:** Fallschirmjäger attack an Allied defensive ridgeline on 28 May 1941. By this time only small rearguard units remained on the island, because a day earlier Major General Freyberg had ordered a complete Allied withdrawal.*

***Left:** Armed with his MP40 submachine-gun, a paratrooper runs across open ground. Although lacking major artillery support, the invading force had large-scale air cover from Fliegerkorps VIII.*

***Right:** British troops surrendering their hard-defended positions. Ironically, the success of the Fallschirmjäger led Prime Minister Winston Churchill to enlarge the Parachute Regiment and take its manpower to over 4500, nine times its pre-Crete strength.*

Above: Fallschirmjäger *search a Greek civilian. In both Greece and Crete, civilians found themselves trapped between partisan forces and the Germans. Partisans formed a limited part of the resistance to the Crete invasion and some reprisals were carried out against Cretan communities.*

Above: *Elderly Cretan civilians and suspected partisans are herded towards an olive grove following the mutilation of the corpses of fallen* Fallschirmjäger *by partisans during the night. Once in the grove the villagers were machine-gunned to death as an act of reprisal.*

transporters, and many of the men from FJR 1 who managed to take to their parachutes were slaughtered in mid-air by the thick rifle and machine-gun fire coming from the Allies well-developed defences. Even those that managed to reach the ground found no respite. Many paratroopers were easily picked off by Australian riflemen; indeed two companies which landed on the western edge of the airfield faced such crippling fire that only five men survived – by jumping into the sea and swimming down the coast.

Heraklion, like all the other airfield objectives attacked on the first day, would be unsecured by nightfall. On the whole, it had been a truly awful day for the *Fallschirmjäger*. Dead and wounded lay scattered across the northern coast of Crete. Even the Allied defenders were shocked by the sight of grey-clad bodies scattered thickly underfoot in relatively small areas of land. If there was some mercy left for the remaining Germans it was that the Allies did not pursue counter-attacks in the night. This was to prove a big mistake.

The second day

On the next day, 21 May, the *Fallschirmjäger* finally took the step from survival towards victory, though much hard fighting and tragedy remained. At Maleme the vital and dominating Point 107 was eventually overrun in a stealthy early-morning operation by I./LLStR, after which they used captured anti-aircraft guns against the airfield's defenders. At 1400 German bombers revisited the area in a further attempt to soften up the now suspiciously quiet defenders, following which another two companies of LLStR were airlanded. These provided the final impetus to take the airfield and after a violent battle Maleme fell. In a vicious aside, it turned out that during the night partisans had mutilated the bodies of men from III./LLStR (135 paratroopers were actually killed on Crete by partisans), an atrocity for which the *Fallschirmjäger* took its own bloody revenge (see photograph above).

With the airfield now in German hands, reinforcements were quickly brought in. These included some mountain troops of the 100th *Gebirgsjäger* Regiment (GJR 100), but as if there had not already been enough suffering, the overcrowding at the airfield led to the transporters crashing into one another, pushing up the casualty lists even higher. The mountain troops would suffer another cruel blow too. As the 3rd Battalion of GJR 100 and the 2nd Battalion of GJR 85 were being shipped across to Crete in fishing boats, accompanied by the Italian destroyers *Lupo* and *Sagitario*,

Below: *Paratroopers moving through Crete's rugged coastal region. New air drops of* Fallschirmjäger *were made across the northern coastline throughout the battle for Crete, the last being a deployment over Heraklion airfield on 28 May which finalised the taking of that area.*

Above: *A unit of* Fallschirmjäger *regroups during the fight for the island. Paratroopers on Crete, particularly those in the early waves, generally carried no more general supplies than a basic food bag and water canteen, allowing the prioritisation of weapons and ammunition.*

Above: *A group of* Fallschirmjäger *officers and men observe the progress of battle from a salient point on Crete. The draped swastika flag is not just a territorial claim; it would also have provided a means of identification for the* Luftwaffe*'s bombers.*

Left: *Paratroopers take a moment's respite from battle. Some of the most ferocious streetfighting took place in the island's capital, Canea, which contained large concentrations of British troops and was also a key position for Allied anti-aircraft defences.*

they ran into a powerful Royal Navy force. In the British shellfire that followed fewer than 60 of the mountain troops survived (some revenge was extracted the next day when Stukas sank two Royal Navy cruisers).

LLStR had fought incredibly hard for Maleme, and the unit would see much more fighting because Canea did not fall for another six days. At Rethymnon, FJR 2 spent four days in an olive-oil factory resisting constant bombardment and counter-attacks from around 7000 Australian soldiers. Having retreated

Above: *The battle for Crete over, a paratrooper takes a rest on 7 June with his MP38 still ready in his lap. Airborne tactics had been demonstrated with such courage that the US was inspired to expand its airborne forces to divisional strength.*

Right: *Paratroopers at Heraklion during the final stages of the battle for Crete. Heraklion and Maleme were the two main airfields (Rethymnon was a simple landing strip), consequently there were considerable anti-aircraft defences to breach at each.*

from their positions and then counter-attacked, the Germans finally won the battle on 30 May. What remained of FJR 2 was boosted by troops of GJR 85 who had been sent as support following the fall of Canea.

At Heraklion, progress for the Germans was a slow business. A major attack on 21 May had been repelled by the Allies, who had 8000 defenders and artillery. Recognising the futility of conventional assaults upon these positions, the paratroopers instead chose a form of siege tactic. They isolated Heraklion from

possible reinforcements and also conducted stealth raids at night to take out some of the artillery positions. While doing this, the Germans built up their own strength with an extra battalion and elements of the 5.*Gebirgs-Division*. By 27 May, with the demoralised Allies having already evacuated the majority of their units, the Germans took the town and airfield at Heraklion without any serious opposition. In effect, the battle for Crete was over.

A different war

In one sense, the battle for Crete was a clear victory for the German airborne forces. The objectives had been taken, with the Allies defeated and the island captured. Yet the victory was a pyrrhic one. The Germans had used 22,000 airborne soldiers to attack Crete, but in only nine days 3250 of them were killed or missing, with another 3400 wounded. By contrast, the Allies had suffered 2500 dead, though well over 10,000 prisoners had fallen into enemy hands.

It is reported that after the operation on Crete, Hitler told Student that 'the days of the paratrooper are finished'. While it would never again parachute from the skies as a large-scale strategic formation, the *Fallschirmjäger*'s days as operational soldiers were far from over, for much hard fighting stretched ahead in theatres such

Below: **Fallschirmjäger** ***in Heraklion town on 29 May 1941. Following the town's capture, some elements of the 5.*** **Gebirgs-Division** ***and FJR 1 pursued retreating Allies across the island, though only limited action in the mountainous central regions was encountered by FJR 1.***

Above: *Paratroopers relax after the victory at Heraklion. Hitler told Student that following Crete parachute deployment's tactical surprise was gone (and its status as a secret weapon), and most of the men went on in other theatres to land operations only.*

Below: *The ferocity of the fighting at Heraklion is evident in this scene of devastation. The paratrooper's main firepower was from airdropped 3.7cm anti-tank guns and recoilless rifles (the latter got their first testing in Crete), as well as* Luftwaffe *air support.*

as Russia, Italy and western Europe. Crete had demonstrated in an unforgiving fashion the terrible vulnerabilities of airborne deployment, both in gliders and by parachute. Gliders proved to be slow-moving targets for well-directed anti-aircraft fire and their landing was always precarious and prone to reducing the number of operational soldiers even before combat began. Parachute deployment meant that men had to spend exposed seconds hanging in the air in full sight of the enemy, and then even more dangerous minutes retrieving weapons containers and unstrapping themselves from their parachutes (that was assuming that the paratrooper had not been injured during landing).

But all these reasons apart, the paratroopers would rarely take to the air again simply because the war was biting into Germany's resources and the planes and infrastructure were no longer there to facilitate such major parachute drops. The *Fallschirmjäger*'s wings had been clipped and the era of ground operations commenced.

CHAPTER 5

AFRICA

In 1942 the paratroopers put up an exemplary defence against the Allied advance across North Africa, though in doing so entire battalions and regiments would almost cease to exist.

Left: *Paratroopers keep watch on the horizon in Tunisia in December 1942. In Africa the* Fallschirmjäger *had to adjust to a new ground-based role – one that would even involve retreat.*

Above: *A large fleet of Ju-52s overflying Tunisia in 1943. Despite the decline in airlanding operations after Crete, Ju-52s were still used to speed up deployment to the North African front.*

By the time the *Fallschirmjäger* went into service during the campaign in Africa it had undergone several levels of expansion. In early 1942 a new regiment, FJR 5, had been created under the command of Oberstleutnant Koch. Another new group was *Fallschirmjäger-Brigade Ramcke*, under the command of the generalmajor of that name, which was developed around units which had suffered terrible losses on the Eastern Front, such as I./FJR 2. It consisted of four rifle battalions – I. (Major Kroh), II. (Major von der Heydte), III. (Major Hübner) and IV. *Fallschirmjäger-Lehr-Bataillon* (Major Burckhardt) – plus various artillery and engineer units.

It was these two additional units which bore the brunt of some of the heaviest fighting in Africa. Initially, however, in January 1942 elements of Burckhardt's troops (known as *Kampfgruppe Burckhardt*) were sent from Italy to Libya as an advance party. The group assembled at Wadi el Fara before moving on and establishing defensive positions in the wake of General Rommel's offensive against the Allies on 21 January. With Benghazi recaptured and

Gazala reached by German forces on 4 February the momentum stalled and both sides rested to build up their strength. On 26 May Rommel launched Operation *Venezia* against the Allies so-called Gazala Line and pushed them back to positions at El Alamein, where Auchinleck's troops dug in and formed a defensive line reaching to the Qattera Depression. As reinforcements, Rommel called in *Fallschirmjäger-Brigade Ramcke*, which deployed all its contingents and positioned them around the Qattera Depression.

***Above:** Paratroopers armed with the MG34 man defensive positions around El Alamein.* **Fallschirmjäger-Brigade Ramcke** *had originally been destined for an invasion of Malta, but this was aborted as Africa became a more pressing battlefront.*

During August the paratroopers skirmished with Allied Gurkha and Indian units, then on 30 August a new and major operation was launched (the battle at Alam el Halfa or The Six-Day Race)

***Above:** Water rationing was a difficult feature of desert life for the paratroopers. During the worst moments of the campaign, washing and shaving were often forbidden, as was drinking in the daytime. Supplies generally came from distilled sea water.*

and Ramcke's soldiers participated in Rommel's attempt to encircle the British forces strung out west of Cairo between El Alamein and Qattera. After overcoming heavy resistance from infantry, artillery and an unexpected minefield around Wadi Dier el Ankar, the paratroopers had achieved their initial objectives, but by 3 September the Allies (now under Lieutenant General Montgomery) were counter-attacking across the entire front and Ramcke's troops even had to go to the rescue of the infantry's 164th Light Division HQ, a division which Ramcke later took over command of in addition to his paratroopers. Over the next weeks the offensive ground to a halt, and in expectation of a major Allied

Above: **Fallschirmjäger** *consult Tunisian locals over directions during November 1942. The first paratroopers to arrive in the region were elements remaining from Ramcke's brigade, with Hauptmann Sauer as their commander; I. and III./FJR 5 arrived shortly after, commanded by Hauptmann Jungwirth and Hauptmann Knoche respectively.*

counter-offensive the paratroopers were sent down to the southern sector of the front with the crack Italian Folgore Brigade.

The great retreat

On 23 October 1942 the Allied forces in North Africa launched Operation Lightfoot – otherwise known as the battle of El Alamein. Suffering under the bombardment of 882 Allied guns was an extended German front consisting of Rommel's *Panzer-armee*, several Italian divisions and, in the southern sector, Ramcke's brigade of paratroopers. General Montgomery's surprise tactic was to throw four infantry divisions of the XXX Corps against the 16km (10-mile) sector of Rommel's northern defences, that part of the line which was actually the more heavily defended. Therefore Ramcke's troops received only a limited bombardment and moderate contact with fighting patrols from the 50th Tyne/Tees Division opposite them. Yet with the main force of the offensive being directed to the north and the German forces retreating in the face of it, it faced the perilous prospect of being cut off and left isolated in the desert. Serious gains were now being made by the Australian 9th Division and the South African 1st Division in the north. Rommel resisted furiously, but with Operation Supercharge, Montgomery's second offensive on 2 November, the German front started to dissolve

When this situation became clear, Rommel ordered the paratroopers to retreat to Fuka in the north, which was actually 160km (100 miles) away through what was now enemy-occupied territory. The speed and position of the Allied advance meant that this

destination could only be reached by a longer, more indirect route. And so the men of *Fallschirmjäger-Brigade Ramcke* began their arduous retreat on foot across the North African desert. In five days the paratroopers crossed some 200km (124 miles) of scorched wilderness. Conditions during this march were appalling; blistering temperatures and shortages of water and food resulted in widespread chronic illness such as dysentery and heat exhaustion.

***Below:** Paratroopers march through Tunis in November 1942. The theatre was largely free of the partisan problems encountered in places such as Greece, Russia and Yugoslavia. On the whole the theatre was a straight fight between the Allied and Axis forces, although the Vichy French situation made it complex.*

In addition, the paratroopers would be called upon periodically to fight against elements of the Allied advance, even engaging tanks. The journey, however, was speeded up in its latter stages by the capture on 5 November of a convoy of British trucks on the Via Balbia (an Eighth Army supply route) complete with much needed stocks of food and supplies. Yet the huge number of personnel in retreat meant the trucks could not transport everyone. By 7 November, when the paratroopers finally reached their destination, a 4000-strong brigade had been reduced to around 600 men, the rest being either sick, injured or dead. Despite such terrible losses (and more were to come in the battle for Tunisia), Ramcke's achievement was undeniable and he was awarded the oak leaves to go with his Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross.

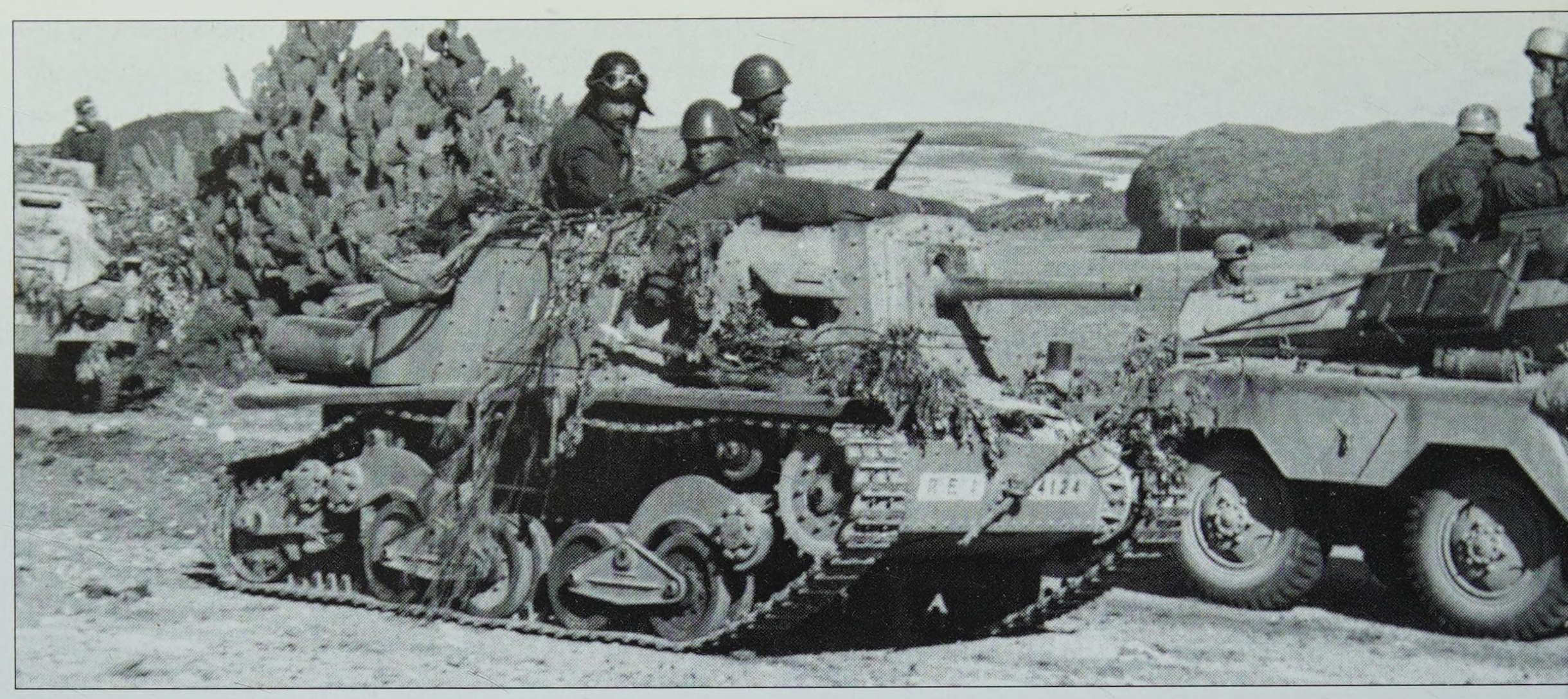
Left: Fallschirmjäger *on the move. Although the Africa campaign was characterised by blistering Saharan weather, the winter of 1942–43 also imposed chill rains and winds against which the newly issued tropical uniforms provided little protection.*

Above: *Two paratroopers are joined by a local in their watch positions in Tunisia. The open expanses of North Africa meant that Allied armour and troops were vulnerable to paratrooper' machine-guns and anti-tank weapons, while the Germans suffered from Allied aircraft and artillery.*

Operation Torch

On 8 November the geographical dimensions of the African theatre changed dramatically with the Allies' launch of Operation Torch. This mainly American seaborne invasion of Algeria and French Morocco was under the command of Lieutenant General Dwight D. Eisenhower and Major General Mark W. Clark, and sought to drive through pacified Vichy French territories and push the Germans back into and out of Tunisia. Although a politically delicate operation because of ambiguous regional loyalties, the Allied force eventually pushed through French Morocco, took Oran, Casablanca and Algiers and started to face an increasingly determined German resistance on the approaches to strategically important Tunisia.

Of paramount significance to the German defence was the deployment of FJR 5 and the Barenthin-Regiment, the latter being an ad hoc paratroop formation under the command of Oberst Walther Barenthin. The paratroopers were sent at the direct request of Generalfeldmarschall Kesselring (via Hitler), and were sent to occupy positions in a defensive ring around the city of Tunis. In addition, the estimable paratroop assault engineers of Hauptmann Witzig's *Fallschirmjäger*-Pioneer Battalion were also deployed, together with Ramcke's few remaining men who were now renamed as Paratroop Company Sauer. In order to give themselves as much defensive space as possible around Tunis, the para-



Above: *North Africa's vast expanses created an unprecedented need for vehicles to enhance land-based mobility. Paratroopers in a* schwerer Panzerspähwagen SdKfz *233 (mounted with a 75mm gun) talk to Italians riding a Semovente L.40 da 47/32.*

Right: *Armour-supported paratroopers occupy a village in 1942–43. Such backing had a significant impact on battlefield success – at Tebourba, for instance, paratroopers in cooperation with Tiger tanks from 10th* Panzer Division *destroyed 134 Allied tanks and were able to take over 1000 prisoners.*

troopers negotiated (backed by the threat of force) with the local French authorities to allow them to move their presence further outwards towards Algerian territory. Thus they were able to extend their defensive perimeter to its maximum extent before the first clash occurred.

The anticipated action came on 17 November when Witzig's engineers, advancing towards Tabarka, came into contact with three companies of the 6th Battalion West Kents near Jebel Abiod in the far north. The British troops were supported by 25-pounder artillery pieces and armoured cars. Several German tanks, part of Witzig's battle group, were destroyed. The paratroopers replied with 2cm *Flak* guns (see pages 167–169) and excellent ground tactics, grinding the Allied advance in this sector into a stalemate. At this point the paratroopers started to pursue limited offensives against the British troops, and a shock night attack on Jebel Abiod itself inflicted serious casualties on the Allies. The action around Jebel Abiod meant that, for the time being, the northern sector was held. Yet the odds were increasingly stacking against Witzig's men. Specialist British airborne forces had now captured the ports of Bougie and Bône and Allied reinforcements were pouring in.

The mass of men and materiel now building up against the northern sector ultimately made Witzig's position untenable and he pulled his men back to Jefna. Here he re-established his

defence, using his experienced troops to build well-constructed positions and strong fields of fire. These defences inflicted such heavy casualties upon the British 78th Division that it ultimately had to defer its attack, instead turning away to the southeast towards the town of Medjez.

Medjez was also the destination of FJR 5 as part of a general Axis strategy of taking over key towns and villages in every defensive sector. FJR 5 was to attempt to dislodge the French, US and British troops that were occupying the town. Following a bombardment by Ju-87 Stukas, initial German attacks were repelled by strong French counter-assaults, so Koch reviewed his strategy and opted to apply his men in multiple small-unit actions. The paratroopers again employed night assaults to formidable effect. Rushing the town in darkness and heavily armed with explosive charges, they succeeded in reaching the centre and all the occupying Allied troops were either killed or repelled. After a pursuit of the enemy survivors up the road to Oued Zarga, the paratroopers were ordered back to Medjez to prepare defensive positions, from which they held off repeated Allied counter-attacks towards the end of November.

Left: *Like all German forces in the North Africa theatre, the* **Fallschirmjäger** *made extensive use of motorbikes throughout the campaign for reconnaissance and courier duties. Such rapid cross-country transportation was invaluable for keeping scattered units coordinated in the defence of Tunisia.*

Below: *Paratroopers of 2 FJD stop in their* VW Kubel *cars just outside Tunis. The unit began its formation in January 1943 from a core of paratrooper survivors of various battles (including Ramcke's brigade) who were mixed with a batch of new recruits. It entered service shortly before the end of the Africa campaign.*

Towards the end

Late November also saw the German paratroopers first clash with their British counterparts. Between 29 November and 2 December, around Depienne, elements of FJR 5 clashed with soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, British Parachute Regiment, with the isolated British defeated and losing over 260 dead. December brought other classic actions, when armour-supported paratroopers inflicted a massive defeat on Allied tanks and troops around Tebourba and El Bathan, taking over 1000 Allied prisoners. This allowed the *Fallschirmjäger* to secure defensive positions on the approach to Tunis which it attempted to develop as part of Operation *Ochsenkopf* (Ox Head) in February and March 1943.

This offensive to extend the Tunis bridgehead was launched against the Allies in all sectors just as American troops were experiencing their defeat in the Kasserine Pass. The paratroopers made some good initial progress but suffered terrible casualties in units that were already depleted. By now, FJR 5 had lost almost all of its second and third battalions and the Germans' northern defence was starting to crumble. The paratroopers had to make several short-range retreats but they delayed the British advance, despite bad losses to British paratroops on the Sedjenane-Beja front.

By mid-April the Allies were ready for their final push. Montgomery's Eighth Army in the south and the Anglo-American forces in the north had now linked up and had already taken Medjez el Bab, a vital point for the capture of Tunis. But the paratroopers were still occupying the heights overlooking the road

Above: *Paratroopers advance through scorching desert conditions. Although the defence of Tunisia was almost entirely a land-based operation, on 30 December No. 3 Company of Witzig's battalion launched an airborne operation against two airfields in Algeria. It was, however, a disaster from which few men returned.*

Left: *A column of paratroopers move through rural Tunisia in late 1942. Their motorcycle lamps have beam-reducers to obscure their night-time presence to Allied ground-attack aircraft – an increasingly serious problem for the Germans, although their machine-gunners shot down several fighters in the theatre.*

Right: Fallschirmjäger *with a captured high-ranking British officer. Despite being pushed inexorably out of North Africa, the paratroopers took thousands of prisoners throughout their retreat and counter-offensives of 1942–43. Many of these were taken through Sicily and on to POW camps in mainland Europe.*

Above: *Captured British paratrooper Corporal Cadden of the 2nd Battalion which had been tasked with taking three airfields around Depienne. The initial drop was successful, but the relief force let it down and the* Fallschirmjäger *took full advantage.*

Right, above: *Iron Crosses awarded in January 1943, further enhancing the* Fallschirmjäger*'s status as one of Germany's most decorated units. This was partly due to its being deployed wherever fighting was heaviest and bravery most in demand.*

between Medjez and Tunis. The soldiers here were units from the *Jäger Regiment Herman Göring* which had arrived in Africa at the end of 1942. In March the remnants of FJR 5 had been incorporated into this regiment, and they were dedicated to guarding the approaches to Tunis.

The end was inevitable, though hard fought. III./FJR 5 actually managed to make an advance against the British, seizing an Allied supply dump near Kir el Briouigue before pushing through towards El Aroussa. Here it was stopped by a combination of anti-tank fire and infantry assaults, and forced to retreat. Further bloody defensive actions were fought around Sidi Salah and Djebel Jaffa, and casualties started to mount.

Right: ***In a well-camouflaged position, gunners load a shell into their anti-tank weapon. Many British guns were captured too and used to good effect against their former owners – 40 guns were seized at Tebourba alone.***

Pushed back more and more into coastal districts and outlying areas, the paratroopers fought impressive delaying actions against the Allies. Yet with massive amounts of artillery power and almost complete air supremacy, the Allies threw several major offensives against the already weakened Germans and on one day alone Tunis, Bizerta and Pont du Fahs fell into Allied hands. On 6 May the Allies launched the final attack which further fragmented the

two *Panzerarmees* remaining in the region, and by 13 May North Africa was taken, and most surviving paratroopers became POWs.

Counting the cost

In realistic terms, FJR 5 and the paratroopers' engineer battalion were completely destroyed in North Africa, through either death, injury or captivity. Witzig's battalion alone was reduced to two officers (he being one of them), four NCOs and 27 men. Yet the presence of the *Fallschirmjäger* in North Africa greatly delayed the Allied advance on several fronts, and certainly inflicted enormous casualties, for many of the German paratroopers present in North Africa were veterans from battles in Russia and were not so susceptible to the shock of combat like many of the raw British and American soldiers.

By this point in the war the *Fallschirmjäger* found itself having to reorganise regularly to take account of the mounting losses suffered across many theatres of the war. After North Africa, a new II./FJR 5 was created, but the regiment as a whole was not fully reconstructed until March 1944, around which time a new engineer battalion was also raised. But from 1944 onwards such units would be almost entirely committed to the shrinking defence of a disintegrating Third Reich.

Above: *Some of Ramcke's men have a rare break during their fighting retreat through North Africa in February 1943. The next month FJR 5 was retitled* Jäger-Regiment Hermann Göring *(part of the* Hermann Göring Jäger Division*), though by this time it was already severely depleted.*

Right: *A machine-gun team level their MG34 ready for an attack. The paratroopers' North Africa campaign had been epic in every sense, but it was not enough to stem the Allied advance.*

CHAPTER 6

THE EASTERN FRONT

The scale of conflict on the Eastern Front was unimaginably costly for both German and Soviet forces, and the *Fallschirmjäger* in particular would experience a truly terrible rate of attrition.

Left: *Dressed in a clean winter uniform, this paratrooper does not reflect the fatigued, frozen and embattled condition into which most* **Fallschirmjäger** *descended on the Eastern Front.*

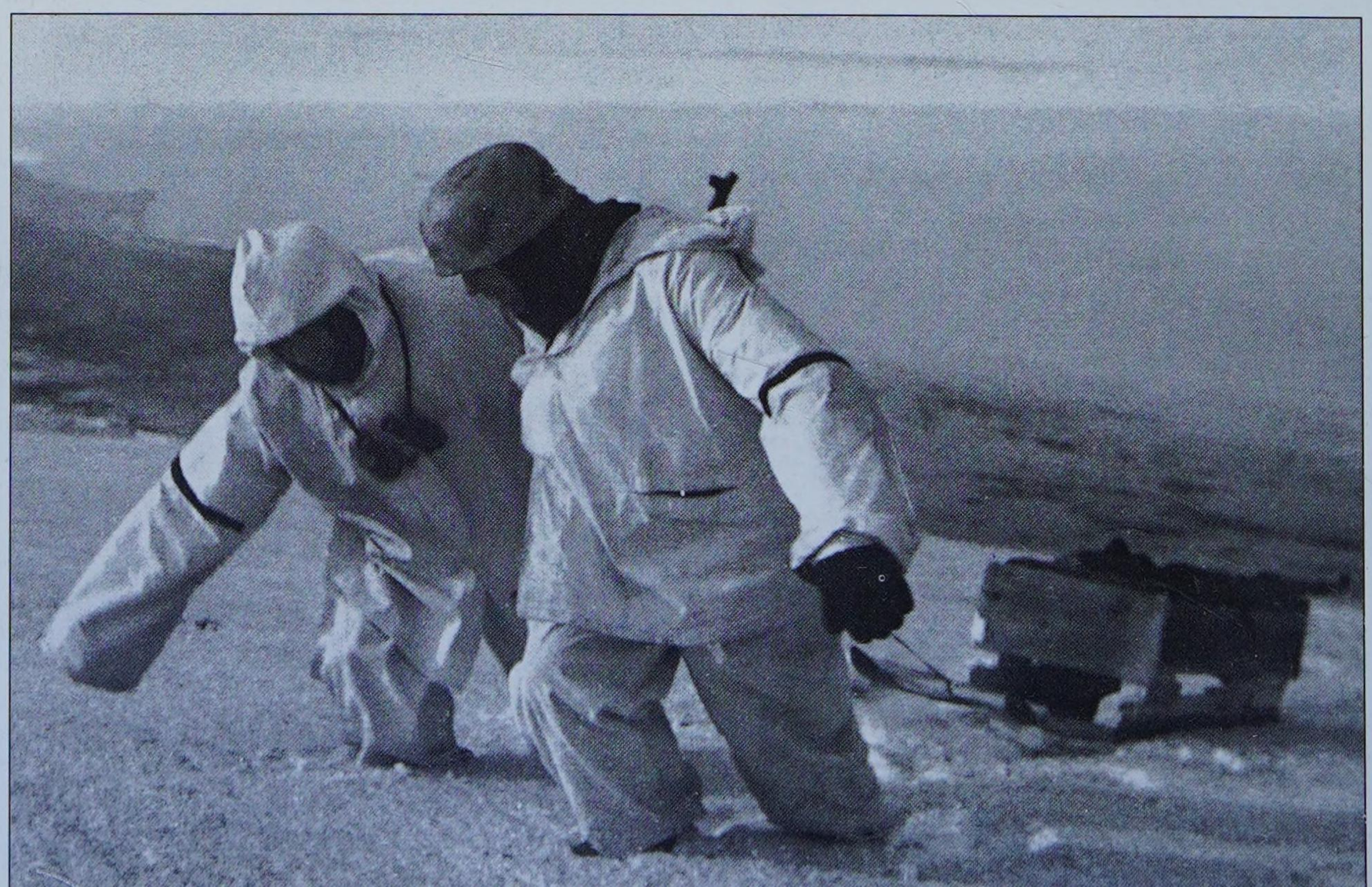
Above: **Fallschirmjäger** *man a mountainous observation and machine-gun post on the Eastern Front. Russia encompassed a vast range of environments, including swamps, forests and cities.*

The opening of the front in the east was undoubtedly Hitler's biggest strategic mistake during World War II. Had Hitler maintained the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of August 1939 and contented himself with the occupation of western Europe, Germany's territorial gains prior to the launch of Operation *Barbarossa* (Red Beard) on 22 June 1941 may well have become permanent and the Third Reich could perhaps have avoided the almost complete destruction that was to be visited on it by the end of the war.

The story of the invasion of the Soviet Union is one of extremes, in both victory and defeat. With the invasion led by 3.6 million soldiers, the German forces rapidly advanced 2000km (1240 miles) into the Soviet Union and by 2 October Army Group Centre had started its attack on Moscow in Operation *Taifun* (Typhoon). The fall of the Russian capital, however, was not to be. Suffering from heavy casualties, ferocious weather and overstretched supply lines, the German forces became trapped in an escalating four-year cycle of loss, retreat and defeat.

Above: *Crouching to avoid the blast of an 81mm mortar round. Apart from a small parachute operation by some Brandenburgers to capture a bridge in 1941, the war in the east was entirely a land campaign for the paratroopers.*

Right: *Paratroopers in winter smocks pull their supplies on a sledge through deep snow. The snowsuit was worn over an insulated winter uniform which gave some protection against the severe cold.*



Above: *Hidden behind a bank of snow, a paratrooper keeps watch on the horizon for any signs of Soviet troop and armour movements. The vastness of the Eastern Front meant that the* **Fallschirmjäger** *suffered from continual changes of sector to meet new Soviet threats in different areas.*

The *Fallschirmjäger*'s involvement on the Eastern Front began in the winter of 1941. The operations on Crete, which had cost the paratroopers more than 3000 dead only one month before Operation *Barbarossa* was launched, meant that they had no involvement in the initial invasion, but their first Russian deployment came soon thereafter. Orders arrived on 24 September that the 7th Air Division had to join Army Group North in its encirclement and blockade operation around the city of Leningrad. The operation had degenerated into a siege in which the German forces were vulnerable to huge Russian counter-attacks from the Volkhov Front to the east, especially as Army Group North lost around 50 per cent of its Fourth *Panzerarmee* tanks when they were redeployed to the Moscow offensive. The 7th Air Division was effectively deployed in a 'fire brigade' role, taking its skills to whatever part of the front was under threat or in danger of collapse. The actual units present in the Leningrad area included I. and III./FJR 1; I., II. and III./FJR 3 (with the regimental headquarters of both these regiments); 1. and 2. *Fallschirm-Pioneer* Battalions; II./LLStR; and several machine-gun and artillery units.

The paratroopers' first action around Leningrad occurred on 29/30 September. German encirclement was broken by a Red Army salient to the east of the city around Shlisselburg. This destabilised the positions of the German 1st Infantry Division on the River Neva which bordered the entire eastern side of the city, and the threat necessitated their replacement by the elite paratrooper

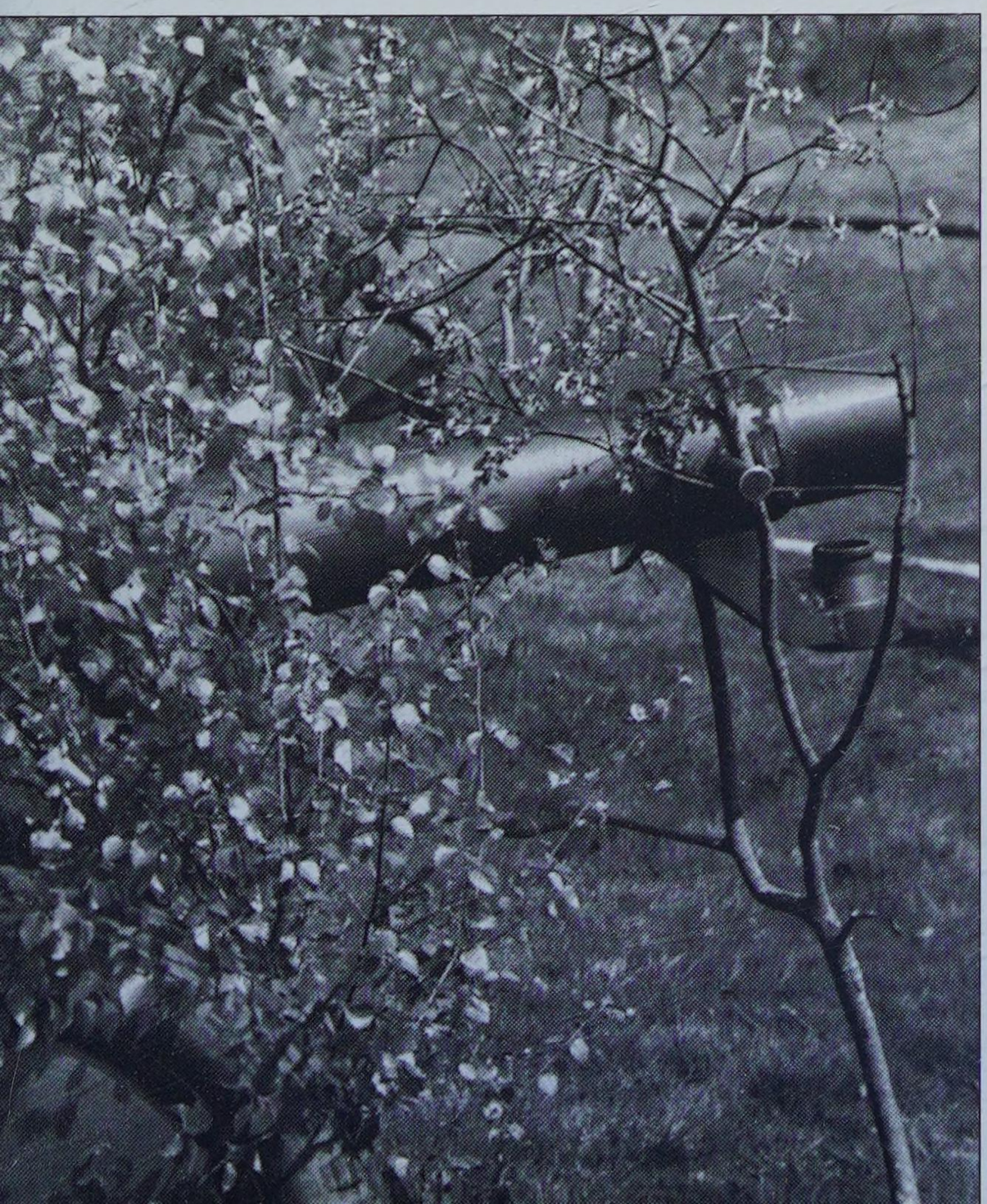
Below: **Fallschirmjäger** *ski-troopers on the move during the winter of 1941–42. Although having previously operated only in western European and Mediterranean climates, the paratroopers quickly adapted to freezing, snowbound manoeuvres, and many became proficient cross-country skiers.*

***Above:** A paratrooper unfurls a Nazi flag as a marker of the German lines for Axis aircraft. Air cover decreased throughout the war: 65 per cent of the* **Luftwaffe** *was engaged on the Eastern Front in 1941, compared to only 32 per cent in 1944.*

***Below:** A three-man team work an artillery piece in northern Russia between March and April 1942. Paratrooper anti-tank units became increasingly vital as growing tank production helped the Red Army to launch more armour-led offensives.*

units. First contact came when LLStR was sent to push back a Soviet bridgehead at Petroschkino. This it did with a rapid assault and the supporting firepower of the machine-gunners of No.2 Company, sending Soviet troop and armoured deployments retreating across the river, where they were held despite vigorous counter-attacks. LLStR was then redeployed in a similar crisis operation around the Viborgskaya sector. Both of these operations demonstrated the effectiveness of the *Fallschirmjäger* in its 'fire brigade' role, but losses had been heavy.

Early October saw the arrival of II. and III./FJR 3, which immediately went into action against more Soviet bridgeheads on various sectors of the Neva. The 7th Air Division's HQ troops arrived in mid-October, and as fighting intensified additional *Fallschirmjäger* units were put into action – especially when Soviet forces started to mount major offensives from the east. Particularly bitter fighting was encountered by two *Fallschirm-Pioneer* companies in the vast and gloomy Ssinyavnio woods, through which the 55th Red Army and the Soviet Neva Operations Group made a drive in mid-October in an attempt to link up with the 54th Red Army on the Volkhov Front. The battle descended into an unforgiving slaughter which often involved hand-to-hand combat and



Above: *Two paratroopers, carrying MP40s, attempt to dig out supplies stuck in the snow during the heavy winter of 1942. Between 1941 and mid-1943 the paratroopers deployed on four major fronts: Leningrad, Moscow, Smolensk and Stalino, each front costing them heavily in dead and wounded.*

daring anti-tank operations by the *Fallschirmjäger*, all conducted during an absolutely freezing Russian winter. With characteristic tenacity, the paratroopers stopped the Soviet offensive, but the mixture of climate and combat reduced some companies' strength by 70–80 per cent. The pioneers were particularly badly hit; No.3 Company alone had lost 119 men and was pulled out of the line on 16 November.

The heavy fighting in northern Russia was more than matched by that in the south, where I. and II./FJR 2 and other paratrooper units had been sent to the Ukrainian Front. Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, and Kharkov, its second city, had fallen to the Germans in September and October 1941 respectively. In the winter of 1941–42 (one of the harshest of the war years), the paratrooper units operating in the Ukraine were formed into *Kampfgruppe Sturm* under the command of Oberst Sturm and tasked with the

defence of the German sector along the River Mius around Charzysk. Here it resisted bitter onslaughts as the Red Army attempted to break the German line, which snaked from north of Kharkov down to the eastern tip of the Sea of Azov. Again the paratroopers held their positions, though the deficiencies in winter clothing and equipment took as many casualties (and limbs) as the fighting itself.

Offensive and counter-offensive

By 1942 the Eastern Front was soaking up huge amounts of German resources. The paratroopers' manpower had been considerably reduced since September 1941, and as a partial remedy various units in Germany were formed into Battle Group Meindl under the command of the eponymous major. In February 1942 this group was sent to positions around Vyasma, east of Smolensk, then to join FJR 2 at Yuknov, before once more being moved, this time to the River Volkhov as part of the Leningrad forces. At Leningrad the Red Army was still launching huge assaults against the encirclement (I./LLStR had to return home in April to recoup its losses) and in March 1942 there was another attempted breakthrough on the eastern salient. Such was the ferocity of this onslaught that FJR 2 was also brought up to the north, around the town of Lipovka.

Soviet forces then regrouped and launched further offensives in early May. The Soviet plan was to encircle and cut off the German 16th Army, occupying the eastern salient, by using the veteran 11th Red Army and the Second Shock Army under the command of General Morozov and Lieutenant General Andrei Vlasov. The resulting battles were enormously costly for both sides and the men of the *Fallschirmjäger* found themselves locked in combat in terrain ranging from swamps and forests to towns and trenches, with snow and mud the ubiquitous restrictions. FJR 2 took the full force of Vlassov's shock troops when the 11th Red Army was stopped by Army Group North. The Russian attacks persisted with a characteristic disregard for loss of life throughout April and May. FJR 2 even managed a counter-attack outwards from Lipovka, but it was eventually forced back to its original positions.

The Volkhov Front was held, but many units and platoons had been reduced to single figures. Yet again the losses created more demands for reorganisation and recruitment among the paratroopers. FJR 2 was finally pulled out in July and was put under the jurisdiction of the XI *Fliegerkorps*. In addition, a second airborne division was now being created.

Elements of 7th Air Division, commanded by Generalmajor Peterson, were now deployed in support of Army Group Centre around Smolensk, their task being to hold a 90km (56-mile) stretch of the highway linking Smolensk and Vitebsk. Smolensk had fallen to the German Second and Third *Panzer* groups in July 1941 and by 1942 the Germans were expecting a major Russian counter-attack. To test out this theory the paratroopers were sent on intensive and stressful fighting reconnaissance patrols, an occupation which set the limit of winter operations because so much of

***Below:** Part of a series of pictures of life on the Leningrad front (three others are opposite) from the German newspaper report* 'Auf Wurfweite am Feind' *in* Der Adler *of 21 April 1942. Here paratroopers advance to the front.*

Above: *Paratrooper ski-troopers set out across the flat plains of northern Russia in April 1942 as a rapid-reaction force to assist at threatened parts of the front. The wind-chill factor in regions such as this could push the temperature down to -60 deg Celsius.*

Right, top: *At the Leningrad front a paratrooper fires his Mauser* Kar *98K rifle at Russian positions. This was the paratroopers first taste of trench warfare, and four regiments and numerous specialist units served around Leningrad until 1943.*

Right, centre: *A stick grenade is thrown in close-quarter combat. As fighting raged around the city, artillery fire poured in and nearly one million civilians died during the three years of siege.*

Right: *Paratroopers advance along the city's trenchwork defences. The squalor combined with sub-zero temperatures meant that the loss of extremeties and even entire limbs became commonplace and raised the German death toll significantly.*

Below: *A German* Panzer *Mk III tank crosses a temporary bridge around Stalingrad in December 1942. By this point, Red Army forces had already achieved their complete encirclement of the city, trapping 20 divisions of German troops (250,000 men).*

Above: *Ju-87 Stuka dive-bombers roll into the attack over Stalingrad. The loss of the city signalled the turning point of German fortunes in the east, and thereafter many paratroopers found themselves in huge defensive actions across the theatre.*

the German army in the field at this time was committed to the catastrophic battles at Stalingrad.

The tide turns

In March 1943 the 7th Air Division (now called 1st *Fallschirmjäger Division*) finally faced the expected offensive from Marshal Timoshenko's armies. A predictably massive Russian assault using armour and infantry was repelled by the extraordinarily resilient paratroopers. Evidence shows that the *Fallschirmjäger* had been deliberately targeted for the offensive, as Russian intelligence had revealed that the men were to be sent on leave around this time and they expected them to be reticent in the fight. They were disappointed; III./FJR 3 and III./FJR 4 alone held off two Russian divisions at Lushki. The paratroopers dug in and repelled all the major attacks until defeat was conceded due to the sheer numbers of Russian killed and wounded.

The winter of 1942–43 was a period of very bold Soviet manoeuvres, including the encirclement and destruction of General Friedrich Paulus's Sixth Army at Stalingrad. Although the *Fallschirmjäger* held firm around the Smolensk Front, other German sectors started to collapse and the paratroopers were quickly deployed between various operations. The 1st *Jäger* Regiment performed a heroic defence at Orel after a Soviet breakthrough against the Second *Panzerarmee*, and Battle Group Meindl remained in combat in various sectors (now consisting of corps' troops, LLStR, a machine-gun battalion and parts of an anti-tank battalion). Yet the paratroopers' losses were considerable and gradually they were taken out of combat for rest and recuperation in either Germany

***Above:** German transporters overfly a small column of troops in Stalingrad. At times over 120 tons of German supplies were airlifted into Stalingrad each day, but it was far from enough.*

***Below:** A German anti-tank crew keep watch for Russian armour along the Volga during the battle of Stalingrad. The Sixth Army had six* Panzer *divisions, but shortages of fuel and ammunition deprived them of tactical relevance.*

***Above:** A German flag is draped over ruins, but on 10 January 1943 the launch of Rokossovsky's Operation* Koltso *(Ring) was to force Paulus into an acceptance of Russian victory.*

or France – the last being the 4th Battalion of the LLStR taken out from the dank woodlands of the Volkhov Front, which eventually joined the 2nd *Fallschirmjäger Division* (2 FJD) in Avignon as an OKW reserve force for southern European operations.

July 1943 saw the advent of Operation *Zitadelle* (Citadel) – the battle of Kursk. Citadel was Hitler's attempt to use the Ninth Army to the north and the Fourth *Panzerarmee* and Army Detachment 'Kempf' in the south to cut off a major Soviet-occupied bulge in the German lines around Kursk. The resulting battle, involving around 4 million men and 13,000 armoured vehicles, was one of the largest in history, but it also coincided with further Soviet offensives to the north and the Allied invasion of Sicily. Hitler's forces were soon chronically overburdened and Kursk went from a German attack to a Soviet victory.

This led to decisive Soviet advances throughout the Ukraine by a force of 30 infantry divisions, 24 armoured brigades and 10 motorised divisions. The Second Ukrainian Front reached and crossed the River Dnieper, and when its attack was stopped by the First *Panzerarmee* the focus simply switched in turns between attacks by the First and Fourth Ukrainian fronts in other sectors. In the first two weeks of November alone, Kiev and Korosten were recaptured by the Soviets. It was into this desperate situation that the 2nd *Fallschirmjäger Division* was deployed. This had been formed in Brittany in 1943 under Generalleutant Ramcke and,

Far left: *A paratrooper in Russia poses for a photographic portrait in summer 1942. Mid-1942 saw many men of 7th Air Division sent back to France to lick their wounds after a hard and bloody winter of fighting across several sectors in the east.*

Left: *A comparison of this photograph with images taken from, say, Crete, indicates the shift in role experienced by the paratroopers who served on the Eastern Front. Parachute operations had been planned for 1942 against southern Russian airfields, but these never reached fruition and the* Fallschirmjäger *had to accept that it was functioning as a standard infantry unit.*

Below: *Feldmarschal Erich von Manstein (right) consults a map during the battles in the Crimea, June 1942. Manstein was a fluent practitioner of mobile warfare, combining tanks, troops and airpower into an incisive battleforce which dominated the Russians in the first years of the war. Following victories at Kharkov and Belgorod in July 1943, he had to switch to more defensive tactics as the tide of war turned against Germany.*

because of European commitments, was sent to Russia some three battalions short to aid in the defence of Zhitomir.

The paratroopers' first action around Zhitomir was as a relief unit to the 1st SS *Panzer Division* which was struggling in its assault against Soviet-occupied woodland near Radomysl (the specific unit was FJR 2 under Major Pietzonka). Showing characteristic brilliance, the paratroopers went in as relief on 30 November and by the night of 1 December the sector had been cleared.

But the sector did not stay inactive for long. A Soviet counter-attack was soon underway by the 16th Red Army which was trying to reach the River Dniester. FJR 2 used its machine-guns, grenades and mortars to good effect and soon drew the energy out

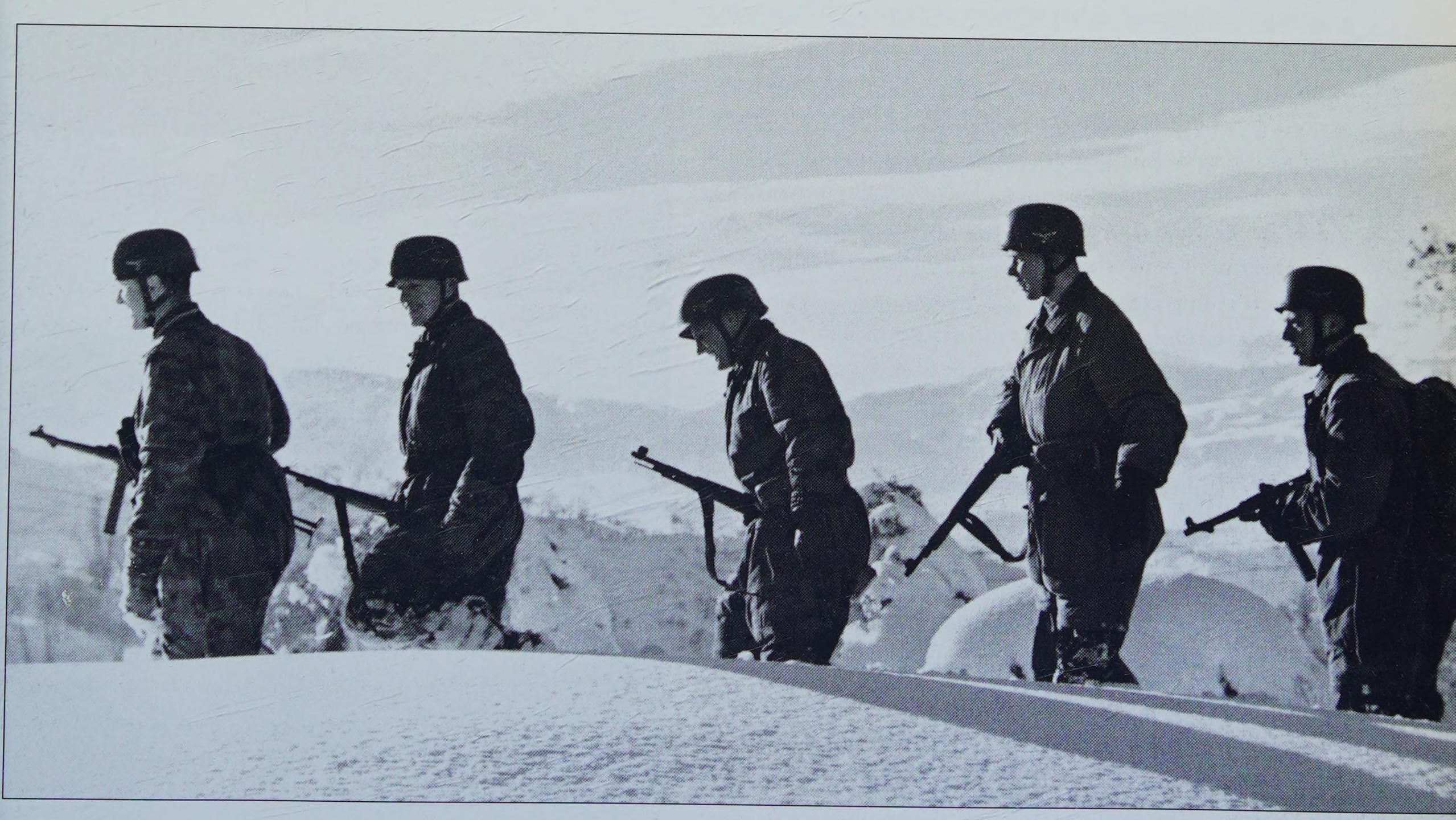
***Above:** A German paratrooper walks past a blazing Russian home. In keeping with other German units, the paratroopers held little empathy with the Slavs of the Soviet Union and often acted very harshly towards them and their property.*

of the enemy attack. However, on 15 December the 2nd *Fallschirmjäger Division* was quickly removed from the Zhitomir sector and flown to Kirovgrad to counter a Soviet breakthrough of the German lines at Kremechug. There it was quickly in action at Klinzy alongside the 11th *Panzer Division* and the 286th *Schwere Panzerbüchse* Brigade (meaning 'heavy anti-tank gun', or SP). Bad weather eventually stalled the German counter-attack, and the paratroopers regrouped. The next week was spent clearing Soviet resistance from key hill positions around Kirovgrad. On 18 and 19 December the paratroopers took the significant points 170.3 and 163.7, while Point N167 overlooking Novgorodka exchanged hands several times over a one-week period during bloody and often close-quarter combat. The violence of these actions left the paratroopers very vulnerable to full-scale counter-attacks, and by 23 December they were in retreat, though FJR 7 still managed to hold Novgorodka up to the end of 1943.

The end begins

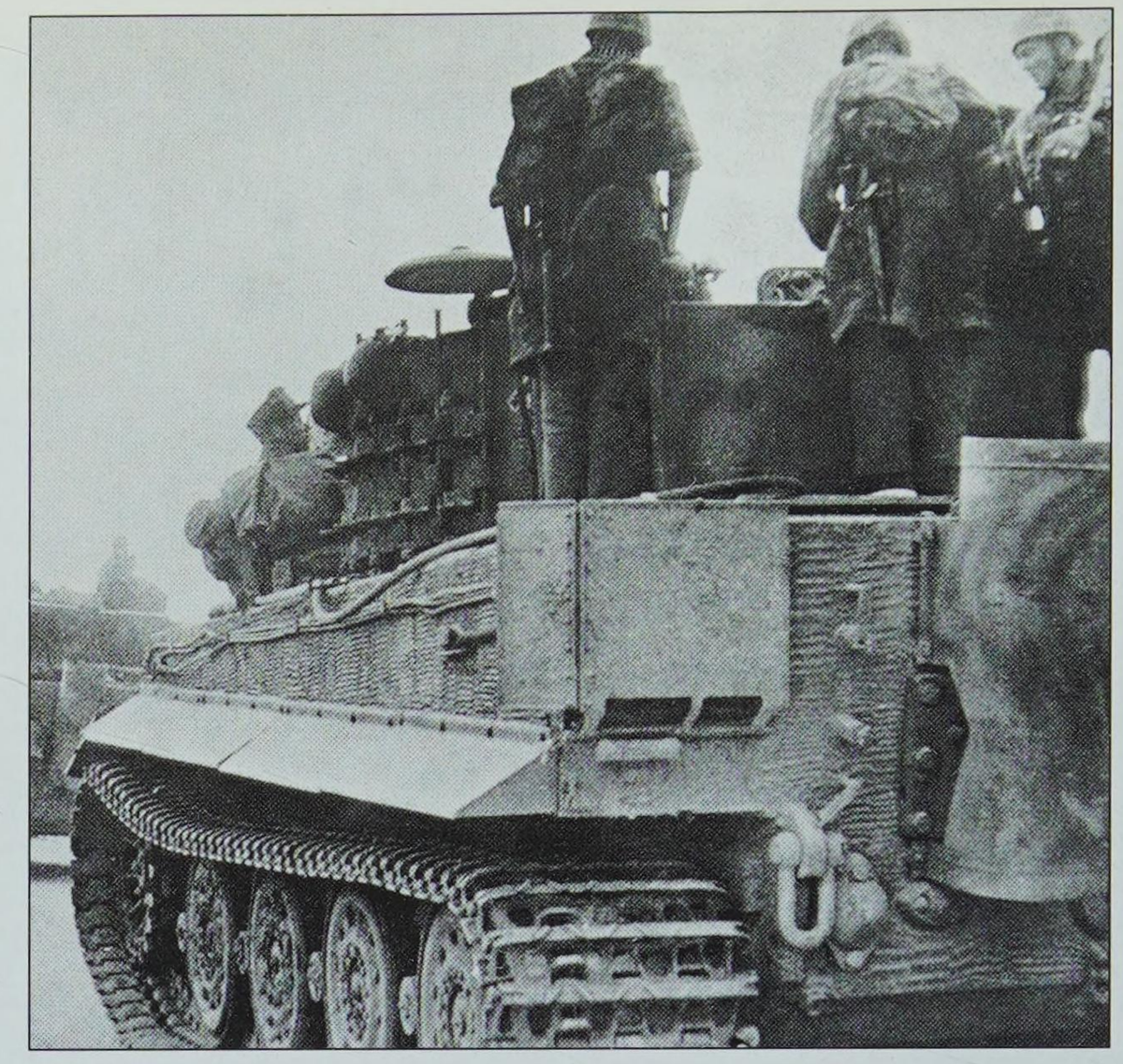
In November 1943 the decision was taken to develop the paratroopers into an Airborne Army, though the losses they were suffering on several fronts made this expansion seen rather optimistic. On 5 January 1944 the paratroopers in the Kirovgrad sector (FJR 2 and I./FJR 5) came under another large-scale Soviet offensive launched by the First Ukrainian Front (General Vatutin) and the Second Ukrainian Front (Marshal Koniev). Although the paratrooper regiments and the artillery of the 286th *Schwere Panzerbüchse* Brigade inflicted huge losses on Soviet tanks and troops (the 286th SP Brigade alone destroyed 60 T-34s in one day), the Red

***Left:** Behind the front lines, paratrooper officers try to plan actions which would give them a strategic advantage. German gains were at their peak in late 1942 and the defeat at Stalingrad in early 1943 changed the military equation dramatically.*



Top: *A paratrooper anti-tank unit man a 3.7cm* Pak *36 in 1943. The fighting was intensely hard throughout that year and the paratroopers resisted huge Soviet offensives with great distinction, holding the line in several vital sectors.*

Above: *A line of* Fallschirmjäger *trudges through deep snow in the winter of 1943–44. For the paratroopers, 1944 marked the final retreat from the east and back into the German heartland itself, a journey which would decimate many of their regiments.*



Army swarmed around their positions and threatened the 2 FJD HQ. Finding themselves isolated, around 8 January the paratroopers started to withdraw under terrible fire. Several companies were entirely destroyed, and by the time the paratroopers reached secure positions battalions such as II./FJR 5 were down to only 30 men (these would go on to be the centre of a new 16th Regiment).

At the end of March 1944 the paratroopers performed a string of fighting retreats; 2 FJD crossed the River Bug and was eventually called upon to defend a section of the River Dniester at Butor. This it did with such success that it even went on the offensive and took some 10,000 Russian prisoners. Following this it returned to France in May, though whatever rest the men received there was soon obviated by the Allied invasion at Normandy in the following month of June.

Witzig's paratroop engineers (1st Battalion of 21st *Fallschirm-Pioneer* Regiment) stayed on the Eastern front for some time yet. In the company of a *Kampfgruppe* from the newly raised FJR 16, they fought a particularly epic battle on 25/26 July along the road between Dunaburg and Kovno in Lithuania. There they resisted not only a one-hour artillery and Katyusha rocket barrage, but went on to destroy multiple T-34s with hand-deployed explosives. Yet the German paratroopers were a drop in the ocean compared to the millions of Red Army men behind the Soviet offensives. Army Group Centre had already been destroyed, and the whole German front was collapsing in the south. By the time the battalion had reached relative safety it had been reduced to around 65 men and Witzig's men were eventually broken up among other paratrooper units.

Retreat to Berlin

By 1945 many paratroopers were fighting hard in western Europe. Those that remained on the Eastern Front included 9 FJD (the number indicating the rapid expansion of paratrooper divisions between 1943 and 1945). This had been created in February 1945 and consisted of the 25th, 26th and 27th regiments. Its destinations, now reduced to Germany itself, included Breslau (II. and III./FJR 25), the west bank of the River Oder and positions near Stettin on the Baltic. In all positions the division took appalling

Far left: *Paratroopers retreating through the rural landscape of Lithuania in August 1944. Following the Soviet offensive launched on 22 June 1944, codenamed* Bagration, *Lithuania became a terrible place of attrition for units such as Witzig's engineers of 1st Battalion,* Fallschirm-Pioneer *Regiment.*

Left: *A group of paratroopers hitch a ride on a Tiger tank to speed up their retreat from the Russian advance. The rough paint effect on the tank's body is Zimmerit anti-magnetic mine paste. The paratroopers themselves had become extremely competent tank-hunters on the Eastern Front, often working in cooperation with German armoured units.*

Right: *Dishevelled* Fallschirmjäger *take a moment to recuperate in southern Russia in May 1944. Only one more year of the war remained, but the ranks had been slashed by four years of combat. Despite this, Student formed the 1.* Fallschirmarmee *in August 1944, though this would not be active for long.*

casualties in the face of the inexorable Soviet advance. On 16 April II./FJR 27 and III./FJR 26 were wiped out by the biggest artillery bombardment of the war as Koniev and Zhukov launched their competitive offensives for Berlin. While 9 FJD retreated deeper into Germany, it was soon dispersed throughout the country as the situation became chaotic. Breslau fell to the Red Army on 6 May and the two FJR 25 battalions there went into captivity.

In addition to 9 FJD, another new division on the Eastern Front was 10 FJD. This was built around units from I. *Fallschirmkorps* (formed by renaming XI *Fliegerkorps* in January 1944) which had been operating in Italy. On 3 April 1945 10 FJD was sent south to Austria around the Styrian provincial capital, Graz, to resist the advances of the Third Ukrainian Front following the capitulation of Hungary. The division fought in several positions throughout Austria and then into the Sudetenland, always with great bravery and tenacity, though its future was now set. The few remaining men of 10 FJD were killed or captured north of Bruenn or (in the case of FJR 30) in Lower Austria towards the end of April. As all its prisoners went into the hands of the Soviet forces it is a sad fact that few would ever return to their native Germany.

Other remnants of the *Fallschirmjäger* continued to fight on the Eastern Front right until the very end, units of 9 FJD even taking part in streetfighting in Berlin itself. On 2 May, Generalleutnant Karl Weidling of the OKW officially surrendered the city and the war ended (though Breslau would resist for some days yet). Some three million German soldiers had lost their lives on the Eastern Front. The paratroopers who had fought there and survived were few in number, and entire divisions, regiments and battalions had ceased to exist. The privations which the paratroopers suffered in the east were quite dreadful (see Lucas, 1988), yet throughout it the ordinary *Fallschirmjäger* consistently demonstrated both an extraordinary courage and an absolute loyalty to his comrades.

Left: *Paratroopers take cover behind a knocked-out T-34 tank. Although the* Fallschirmjäger *became highly skilled tank-busters, the sheer quantity of men and materiel that the Red Army was eventually able to field meant that no matter how great an effort the paratroopers made it was dwarfed by the scale of opposition.*

CHAPTER 7

ITALY

The Allies attempt to open a second front through Italy in 1943 led to some of the *Fallschirmjäger*'s greatest defensive actions, including the monumental battle to hold Monte Cassino.

***Left:** A graphic image of the total devastation caused by Allied artillery and bombing at Monte Cassino, the site, arguably, of the paratroopers' greatest defensive action of the entire war.*

***Above:** A* Fallschirmjäger *defends from a water-filled shellhole. After each bombardment, the survivors would emerge from under the ground and turn the rubble into firing positions.*

By the end of January 1943, there were two fully fledged *Fallschirmjäger* divisions in operation: 1 FJD was simply a renaming of the 7th Air Division, while 2 FJD, under Generalleutnant Ramcke, was born from a combination of various units, including some of FJR 5 who had survived the battles of North Africa. Taken together these two divisions constituted a force of around 30,000 fighting men, and the OKW officially classed them as a mobile reserve force.

It was in this capacity that the paratroopers were drawn into the Allies' Italian campaign of 1943–45. With the Axis defeat in North Africa, the British chiefs of staff saw an invasion of Italy as an ideal way of maintaining a second front, putting an extra drain on German forces needed for the Eastern Front, and drawing down German reserves based in France in preparation for Operation Overlord – the Allied invasion of mainland Europe. Yet before the campaign could go ahead, the Allies had to consolidate

***Above:** An Italian paratrooper near Anzio reports to German* **Fallschirmjäger.** *The Italians only had one parachute division, but it was a respected force and elements of Regiment Nembo fought alongside the Germans around Anzio and Nettuno.*

their positions in the Mediterranean. This involved the capture of Sicily through the execution of Operation Husky.

The invasion of Sicily

The plan for Operation Husky, born out of much Anglo-American dispute among General Alexander's newly created 15th Army Group, proposed what would be the biggest amphibious operation in the European theatre outside of Overlord itself. The 180,000 men of 15th Army Group, consisting of Field Marshal Montgomery's Eighth Army and General Patton's US 1st Armoured Corps, would be deployed by some 2590 ships onto the island of Sicily in July 1943. The British landing zone was on the east coast between Pozallo and Syracuse and the Americans on the southwest coast between Cape Scaramia and Licata, each force then being responsible for the capture of its half. An initial objective was to seize significant German and Italian air bases and the ports at Syracuse, Licata, Augusta and Catania before going on to secure the island in its entirety.

Defending Sicily were two Italian Army corps under the command of General Guzzoni and 30,000 German troops of the XIV *Panzerkorps*. This was not sufficient to hold back such a huge Allied force, and when Operation Husky began on 10 July, XI *Fliegerkorps* was ordered to standby. Student suggested an

Above: *German paratroopers in action around Salerno. The scale of the Allied landings across southern Italy meant that the* **Fallschirmjäger** *was overstretched and found itself shuttled between sectors on the Mediterranean and the Adriatic.*

Below: *German paratroopers lay Teller anti-tank mines. The Allies relied heavily on armour in the Italy campaign, yet the narrow roads and tracks (particularly in the mountainous regions) offered very effective opportunities for mine-laying.*

immediate retaliatory paratrooper drop of 3000 men directly into the Allied landing zones. This was rejected by the OKW, but between 12 and 14 July FJR 3, I./ and III./FJR 4 and a paratrooper machine-gun battalion were taken from France and dropped or airlanded to positions around Catania.

Here they set up defensive positions, a particularly vital task being the defence of the Primasole Bridge which spanned the River Simeto. One of Field Marshal Montgomery's central tasks in his force's advance from the east was to reach the Catanian plain, an

***Above:** Two* **Fallschirmjäger** *in an ornate setting. Although the war caused damage to much of Italy's heritage, at Monte Cassino the Germans arranged the removal of art treasures to the Vatican and (prior to bombing) refrained from stationing troops there.*

area which would afford his troops more rapid movement across Sicily. The Primasole Bridge was an essential crossing point for this objective, and if the Germans held it then the Allies' advance to Messina would be either halted or delayed. As well as the main body of Allied troops, the paratroopers in Catania would face two elite British forces: the 1st Parachute Regiment, which parachuted around the airfield at Catania, and the Royal Marine Commandos which followed in an amphibious deployment at Agnone.

The battle for Sicily was to be a bloody one from the start for the *Fallschirmjäger*. Initial deployment at Catania took place against a backdrop of heavy bombardments from US Boeing B-17 bombers and the paratroopers took heavy casualties, the anti-tank units in particular suffering many fatalities when their planes were bombed on the tarmac even before they disembarked. During the night of 13/14 July violent clashes occurred on the Primasole Bridge between the German paratrooper machine-gunners and the British airborne troops. Owing to the similarity of uniforms, the Germans at first mistook the British troops for their own paratrooper engineers who were meant to be reinforcing them at the bridge – they actually dropped over the airfield on 14 July from where they advanced to take over the defence of the bridge.

Over several days the *Fallschirmjäger* on the bridge repulsed ferocious Allied attacks from the British paratroopers, the 50th Tyne/Tees Division and a significant number of Churchill tanks (many of which were dispatched by a single 88mm gun). The bridge was finally captured by the Allies on 15 July, recaptured by the Germans two days later, but then fell permanently into Allied hands whereupon FJR 4 and the engineers were forced to retreat. The Allies now pushed on towards Catania and Messina.

While the fight above the River Simeto was taking place, FJR 3 was locked in a ferocious fight at Agnone with the British 3rd Commando Division under Lieutenant Colonel Slater. One of the commandos' primary objectives was the capture of another crossing point, the Ponte dei Malati. Against stiff German resistance the commandos managed to capture the northern end of the bridge and remove its demolition charges. However, the paratroopers, aided by a Tiger tank, pushed them back off the bridge before themselves being driven off by the arrival of the British 5th and 50th infantry divisions.

By the end of July the situation on Sicily looked bleak for the Germans – Hitler even ordered the drawing up of evacuation plans on 25 July. The Allies had secured extensive bridgeheads reaching out from their initial points of invasion and were advancing well. Under some pressure from General Alexander to speed things up, the British 78th Infantry Division and Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade then made a drive up the Dittaino Valley, into which FJR 3 had been placed to prohibit any further advance; II./FJR 3 were situated in Centuripe, a high-altitude village (733m/2400ft) which was one of the Allies' main objectives.

The attacks started on the night of 30/31 July and followed a huge artillery bombardment. The offensive pushed through I./FJR 3 but halted at Centuripe in the face of strong German resistance. Centuripe was then levelled by a huge air attack, but the paratroopers had already pulled back to positions south of the village. Eventually these too were overrun by the strong Allied advance, and the paratroopers withdrew to Regalbuto to join III./FJR 3. Yet by this stage of the campaign, no positions on Sicily offered any respite. Regalbuto was abandoned after aerial and artillery bombardments and assaults by the 231st (Malta) Brigade, Catania was abandoned on 6 August and Adrano fell on 8 August.

All Axis troops were being forced back to Messina. Sensing imminent defeat, Oberst von Bonin, the XIV *Panzerkorps*' chief of staff, prepared a systematic withdrawal plan for ferrying German soldiers across to mainland Italy. This plan was in turn approved by Feldmarschall Kesselring (Commander-in-Chief South West) and then by the OKW. Evacuation started on 11 August, the paratroopers fighting characteristic delaying actions across the island to allow the evacuation of as many men as possible. They themselves abandoned Sicily in the last few boats. Sicily was now in Allied hands, though their 20,000 dead, missing and wounded gave some indication of what awaited them on the Italian mainland.

Above: *Paratroopers aboard a* SdKfz *222 armoured car during the occupation of Rome in September 1943. Initially this was accomplished by six battalions under Major von der Heydte, who was then injured in an air crash shortly after Rome was taken.*

Right: *General Richard Heidrich, the commanding officer of the 1st Parachute Division at Monte Cassino. His war ended in Italy; he led the paratroopers in their retreat into the north of Italy until the surrender of German forces there on 2 May 1945.*

The Italian Campaign

During 1943 domestic discontent extended to the very heart of Italian politics and society. Its army had suffered terrible defeats on the Eastern Front and in North Africa, and Italy itself was now starting to experience the direct bombing of its cities. Dissatisfaction with Mussolini's rule produced many contenders for power. After an angry meeting of the Fascist Grand Council on 24 July, Mussolini was arrested and taken away to a hideout, variously at Ponza, Maddelena and Gran Sasso. Governmental control was transferred to Marshal Badoglio, who secretly negotiated an armistice with the Allies which finally took effect on 8 September.

Alarmed by the news, the Germans immediately sent 2 FJD and the 3rd *Panzer Grenadier* Division to the area above Rome with the objective of disarming the *Corpo D'Armata di Roma*, Rome's principal military garrison. Although technically the Germans were now their foe, many Italian forces did not respond

Above: *Tense faces indicate the experience of combat at Cassino in March 1944. Although they appear well armed, a big problem for the* Fallschirmjäger *at Cassino was a lack of heavy weaponry, most of which was destroyed during Allied bombardments.*

Left: Fallschirmjäger *carrying boxes of ammunition begin the preparation of the defences. The key tools were machine-guns and explosives, the latter being useful against the Allied tanks unwisely deployed in Cassino's narrow and rubble-strewn streets.*

aggressively to the German presence. In Rome itself, however, fighting broke out in both the suburbs and the city centre but by 11 September the *Fallschirmjäger* had quashed resistance and Rome was in German hands.

Yet by 11 September there was a still greater concern for the German forces. To coincide with the Italian armistice, on 9 September the Allies invaded mainland Italy in massive amphibious landings in the south and west of the country. Montgomery's Eighth Army had landed in the south around Reggio di Calabria while the Fifth US Army had put ashore at Salerno on the west coast. Kesselring was ordered to resist vigorously and he put together one of the most dynamic strategies of attrition of the war.

The 1st *Fallschirmjäger* Division (1 FJD) was generally moving throughout the region of Calabria prior to the invasion, with FJR 1 heading off to positions around the Gulf of Taranto and III./FJR 1 in Salerno. Once fighting broke out, II./FJR 1 managed to resist British attacks in Calabria, but lack of German numbers at Salerno and Taranto soon allowed the Allies to consolidate their positions there. Units of 1 FJD were then deployed south to combat the Eighth Army's drive up from Taranto, but the overwhelming Allied strength put them into a northwards retreat – one that was repeated after a British push towards Bari on the Adriatic coast.

The defence of Rome itself had started to become a serious issue for the Germans, especially after Foggia (a vital Axis bomber base) fell to the Allies on 27 September, despite heroic resistance by elements of 1 FJD. On 5 October Naples also fell. Allied troops were now nearing the series of light defensive positions known as the Bernhardt Line. These crossed Italy from northwest of Naples to the east coast at Fossacesia. The evident insufficiency of the line led Kesselring to order the construction of the Gustav Line. This was effectively an extension of the Bernhardt Line but consisted of stronger defensive positions which ran along mountainous areas (including Monte Cassino) and formed a protective shield around Rome. Among those employed in helping to build the line was 1 FJD, but as the remaining 3rd and 4th regiments were pushed back up Italy by the Allied advance Heidrich ordered the full division to deploy itself in defence of the Apulia region.

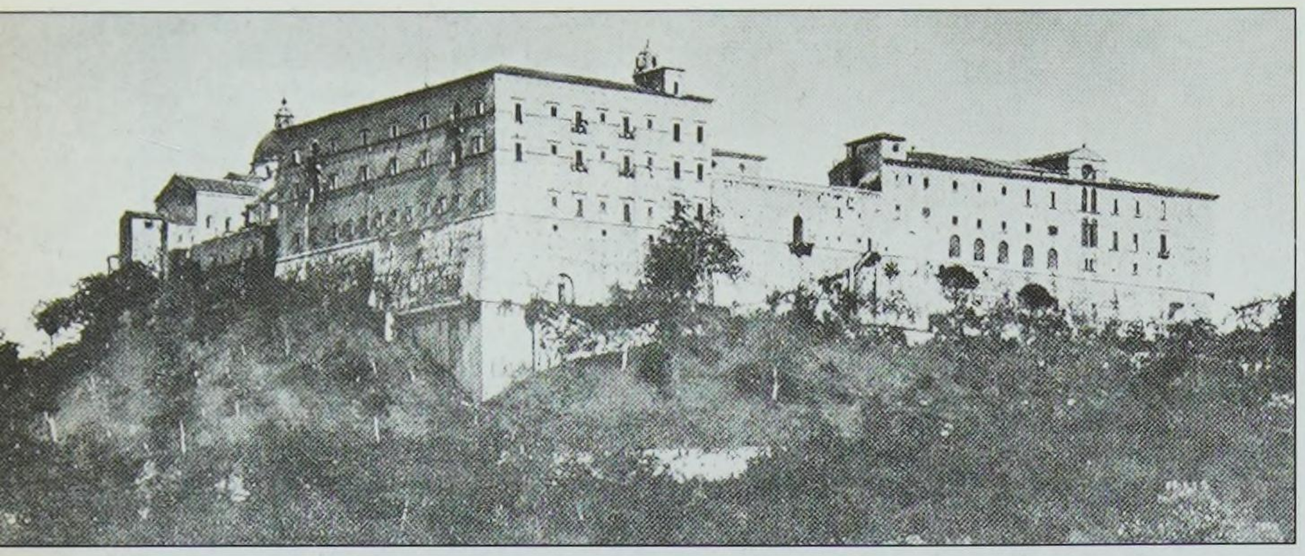
Above: *A* **Fallschirmjäger** *advances up to Monte Cassino. The winter of 1943–44 in Italy was severe, with heavy snowfalls, low temperatures and seemingly endless rain; this soldier's windproof smock would have been a valuable piece of kit.*

Here major battles were fought by I., II. and III./FJR 3 at Ortona and III./FJR 4 and III./FJR 6 at Orsogna (where they reinforced the 26th *Panzer Division* against a huge New Zealand infantry attack on 3 December). Doggedly the paratroopers held on to the sectors, though the Allies now had complete air supremacy and 1 FJD was bombed mercilessly at Ortona. A massive Canadian attack in early December pushed 1 FJD back to a section of the Gustav Line on the Adriatic coast. But here the German defence was solid, and over on the west the US Fifth Army was being stopped by XIV *Panzerkorps*. Consequently, the Allied objectives shifted and 24 Allied divisions squared up to the defences on the Garigliano and Rapido rivers and the mountainous area around Cassino.

Monte Cassino

Alongside Crete, the *Fallschirmjäger* defence of Monte Cassino ranks as possibly the greatest single action fought by it during World War II. The mountainous region around the small town of

Left: *A group of paratrooper motorcyclists near Cassino. The Allies hoped that their invasion at Anzio would draw German forces away from central Italy and leave the way open for an advance on Rome. The paratroopers sorely frustrated that plan at both Cassino and Anzio.*



***Above:** The Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino prior to its destruction by Allied bombing. Its dominant position and its location between Rome and Naples meant that it had suffered in warfare before, but the incredible loss of life was unprecedented.*

Cassino was vital to the Allies hope of victory in Italy. Lieutenant General Mark Clark wanted to drive the US Fifth Army up the Liri Valley to take Rome. This valley was dominated by two mountains – Monte Maio to the south and Monte Cassino to the north. Monte Cassino was landmarked by a Benedictine monastery on its 516m (1693ft) summit, and though the German 10th and 14th armies had built strong defences up its slopes and in the town of Cassino at the base of the mountain, they claimed not to have occupied the ancient monastery itself.

To the battle of Cassino 1st *Fallschirmjäger* Division was deployed, the first units to arrive being I. and II./FJR 1, III./FJR 3 and the paratrooper corps' machine-gun battalion. They took up

***Below:** Paratroopers consult their maps at Nettuno in June 1944. The* Fallschirmjäger Lehr *Regiment, 4 FJD and some units of 1 FJD held the Anzio-Nettuno front for four months while their comrades fought on at Cassino.*

Above: *The Abbot of Monte Cassino monastery is helped to safety by German officers shortly before it was reduced to ruins by Allied bombers on 15 February. Leaflets dropped by the Allies on 14 February warned of the bombing and requested evacuation.*

positions stretching from Monte Cassino itself to Monte Calvario just over one kilometre (0.6 miles) from Cassino. Fighting around and then in Cassino raged between January and May 1944. On 11/12 January French Expeditionary Corps soldiers had taken some of the outlying defences in the area but American attacks on the main German positions were sharply repulsed. During this early stage of the battle, the Allies had opened yet another front through the landing of the US VI Corps at the beaches of Anzio on 22 January. To combat this threat, the paratroopers formed Battle Group Gericke consisting of one battalion from each of the 11th and 12th regiments of the new 4th *Fallschirmjäger* Division. These would later be reinforced by I. and III./FJR 12 and various machine-gun and engineer units. This extremely capable force of paratroopers inflicted heavy losses on the Allies at Anzio and kept them from extending their bridgehead for many weeks.

To coincide with Anzio, the Allies launched their first major attempt to take Cassino on 17 January. Through terrible winter weather the US 2nd Corps crossed the River Rapido (losing many men in the crossing itself) and attacked through the Liri Valley, even capturing Monte Calvario before being expelled by paratrooper reinforcements. The fighting intensified around 11 February as the US 34th and 36th (Texas) divisions and the 4th Indian Division attempted to take Calvario and Cassino town with mass assaults. They did not succeed, instead taking appalling casualties

Above: *A* **Fallschirmjäger** *captured at Anzio-Nettuno enjoys a cigarette. The Allieds insistence on waiting a fortnight at Anzio until they reached maximum strength meant the paratroopers gained time to establish solid defensive positions.*

which included the slaughter of the entire US 142nd Regiment on the slopes of Monte Cassino.

The punishment the Allies received during this first battle led to a suspension of the fighting. In the interim, however, General

Amici italiani,

ATTENZIONE!

Noi abbiamo sinora cercato in tutti i modi di evitare il bombardamento del monastero di Montecassino. I tedeschi hanno saputo trarre vantaggio da ciò. Ma ora il combattimento si è ancora più stretto attorno al Sacro Recinto. E venuto il tempo in cui a malincuore siamo costretti a puntare le nostre armi contro il Monastero stesso.

Noi vi avvertiamo perché voi abbiate la possibilità di porvi in salvo. Il nostro avvertimento è urgente: Lasciate il Monastero. Andatevene subito. Rispettate questo avviso. Esso è stato fatto a vostro vantaggio.

LA QUINTA ARMATA.

Italian friends,

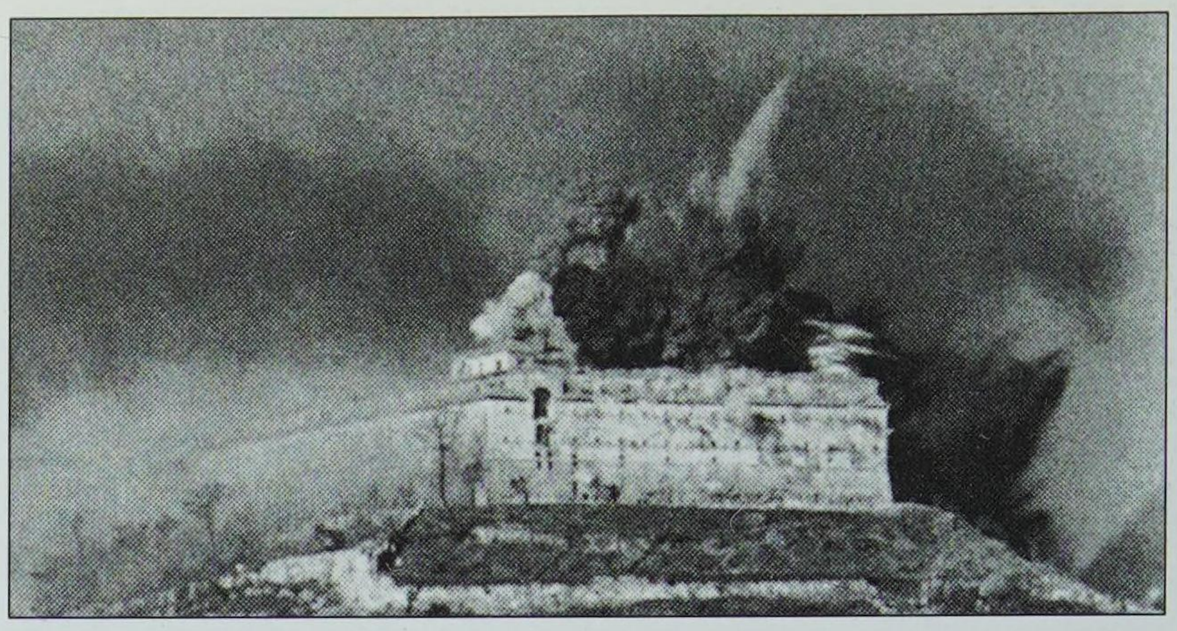
BEWARE!

We have until now been especially careful to avoid shelling the Monte Cassino Monastery. The Germans have known how to benefit from this. But now the fighting has swept closer and closer to its sacred precincts. The time has come when we must train our guns on the Monastery itself.

We give you warning so that you may save yourselves. We warn you urgently: Leave the Monastery. Leave it at once. Respect this warning. It is for your benefit.

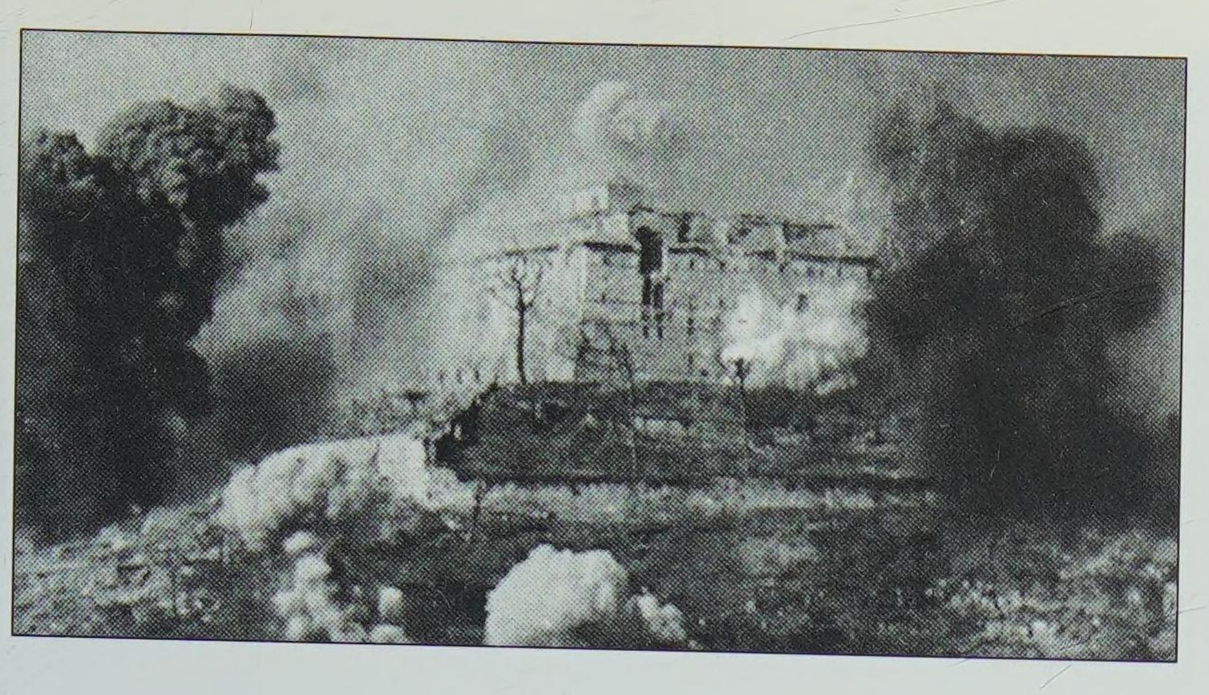
THE FIFTH ARMY.

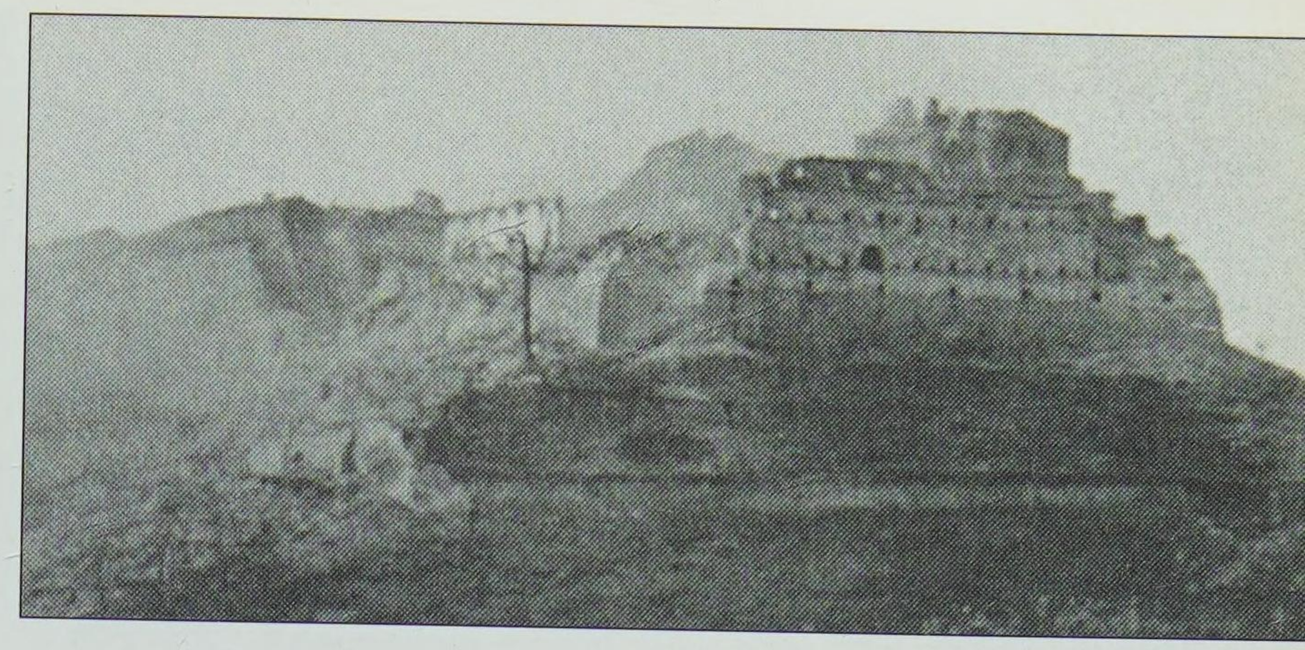
Above: *One of the leaflets dropped by the Allies on 14 February 1944 advising the Italian civilians and monks in Monte Cassino to evacuate before the bombing. The destruction of the monastery was justified on the grounds that the Germans were using it as an artillery observation post. This was denied, with the argument that such an obvious location would be too vulnerable.*



Above and right, top: *A sequence of photographs shows the first bombs exploding in and around the monastery. The last picture clearly illustrates the destruction wrought, but also the new defensive possibilities of the ruined monastery for the Germans.*

Below: *In Cassino town, a* Fallschirmjäger *runs for his life through an enemy bombardment. At its worst this created such an earthquake effect that many paratroopers were buried alive in the cellars and dug-outs in which they took cover.*





Alexander endorsed a firm request by Lieutenant General Freyberg to bomb the monastery itself. On 15 February 229 Allied bombers (including 142 Boeing B-17s) dropped hundreds of tons of bombs on the monastery (and 3 FJD on the slopes), turning its thick walls into ruins. Ironically, although this measure was meant to deprive the Germans of the use of the monastery as a defensive position, all it succeeded in doing was making the building physically more difficult to take and gave the Germans the green light to now treat the monastery as a military position and occupy its many underground passages and catacombs. From the 15 to 18 February the 4th Indian and 2nd New Zealand divisions launched attempts to take Monastery Hill, Monte Calvario and Cassino railway station, but were subject to a ferocious slaughter, the Indian division in particular being decimated on the steep hillside by fire from paratrooper machine-gunners.

***Above:** Italian civilians forced to evacuate Cassino town after heavy Allied shelling had reduced it to little more than rubble. The destruction of the town, like that of the monastery, created problems of movement and clear tactical understanding for the Allies which the* **Fallschirmjäger** *defenders were all too ready, not to mention skilled enough, to exploit.*

Above: *Fatigue is etched on the faces of these paratroopers as they organise their deployment around Monte Cassino. The monastery itself had superb defensive properties: accessible only up the steep slopes and with many underground rooms and passages.*

Above: *Paratroopers reassess their tactical options in the apocalyptic surroundings of Cassino town. The rubble gave good cover for the sowing of anti-tank and anti-personnel booby traps, and many Allied troops were lost to mines.*

Above: *An uncharacteristically quiet moment sheltering in t he ruins. Some of the walls were five metres (15ft) thick and provided excellent cover from small arms fire. It was this that made the monastery such a costly retaking for the Allies.*

By this point the Allies were licking their wounds. Monte Calvario alone had changed hands four times by the end of March. Thus a break in the fighting gave the paratroopers a chance to reorganise: II. and No.12 Company of FJR 3 occupied the town (reinforced by the 1st *Fallschirm-Pioneer kompanie*), while I./FJR 3 went on Monastery Hill itself and FJR 3 and 4 occupied the hills behind Cassino. The 1st *Fallschirmjäger* Division under Heidrich was now in charge of a 13km (8-mile) sector of the Cassino Front.

Above: *A paratrooper in the monastery takes aim with his* Fallschirmjäger-gewehr *42 (FG42) assault rifle. The rifle's high muzzle velocity and rate of fire would have given this soldier a lethal field of fire, though the FG42 was also prone to stoppages – a dangerous possibility at dust-ridden Cassino.*

Left: *A paratrooper runs through the monastery. The Allies did attempt to take the building using armour directed up a specially cut track to the rear of Monte Cassino, but were stopped by the paratroopers using an 88mm gun and anti-tank mines.*

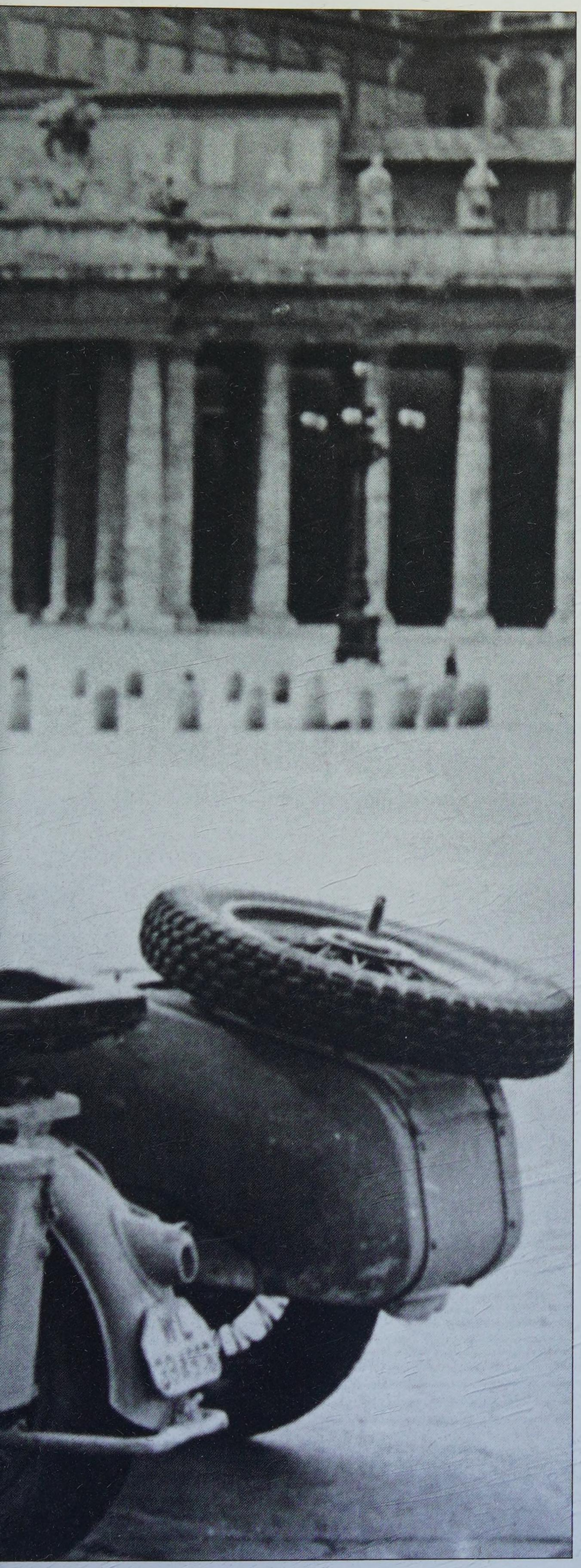
The expected assaults soon came. Following an unsuccessful attack by the 4th Indian Division on 15 March, an enormous air assault by more than 600 Allied bombers, unforgettable to all paratroopers who were there, and an artillery barrage which fired 196,000 shells into German positions were the prelude to mass

infantry assaults by the 4th Indian, 2nd New Zealand and 78th British divisions. The New Zealand contingent pushed into the town using some 400 tanks, but these became difficult to handle in the ruins, and the paratroopers imposed terrible losses on the New Zealand troops at close quarters. Allied gains included the taking of Hangman's Hill, a vital point on the slopes of Monte Cassino, by the Gurkha regiment of the 4th Indian Division.

The paratroopers were now reinforced by II./FJR 1 and the engineer battalion, even managing to put together counter-attacks.

***Above:** A true impression of the horror that occurred at Cassino. The battles in the area resulted in around 20,000 German troops being killed, many of them in the unimaginable bombardments that punctuated the ground battles. Yet the Allies suffered over 110,000 casualties in their capture of the Cassino Front.*

Yet the losses throughout the sector were appalling on both sides, and on the 22 March the Allies finally called off the attack, though they ended it with possession of two-thirds of the monastery.



Above: *Polish soldiers take a prisoner. The Poles themselves sustained over 3500 casualties on the slopes of Monte Cassino, Monte Calvario and other sectors.*

Left: *German paratroopers who had escaped Cassino meet in St Peter's Square in Rome. By this time the Hitler/Dora Line (behind the Gustav Line) had been smashed and the Allies had also broken out of their beachhead at Anzio.*

March concluded with another change around in the paratroopers' positions: FJR 4 and the machine-gunners took over responsibility for the town and Monastery Hill; FJR 3 occupied the mountains, including Monte Calvario and Monte Caira; while FJR 1 was held back in reserve. The regimental names belie how slender some of these units had become, and against them were arraigned four Allied army corps. On 11 May this massive Allied force launched itself in its final offensive, opening with a 2000-gun artillery barrage. The British 8th Corps crossed the River Rapido to assault the town while the Polish 2nd Corps was to make the attack from the north against Monte Cassino and Monte Calvario. The Allies pushing into the Liri Valley would be supported by French forces attacking the town from the south

The final battles were truly ferocious. After several attempts the Poles took Monte Calvario. The Gustav Line was by now collapsing at many points and Kesselring finally gave the order for withdrawal. Amazingly, the Route 6 highway from Cassino to Rome was still open and what remained of the 1st *Fallschirmjäger* Division made its evacuation on 18 May, the day on which Cassino fell to the Allies with the monastery taken by Polish troops.

Retreat to Rome

The battle of Monte Cassino was over, and the paratroopers left in a fast-fighting retreat towards Rome. They did not stay in the city

Above: *Two captured German paratroopers are led away by a British soldier through an extraordinary landscape. Afterwards, even General Alexander was moved to praise the defenders, recognising their obduracy and courage.*

long though because of the advance of the US Fifth Army, which finally took the Italian capital on 5 June 1944. At this time 4 FJD was also withdrawing from Anzio where it had been fighting continually to try and restrain the Allied expansion. The unit would

later fight at Florence and, between October and November, at the Futa Pass (where it suffered around 600 killed). Both 4 FJD and 1 FJD then united in a stand against the Allied Fifth and Eighth armies near Bologna just behind the River Senio. The fighting in this region escalated in January 1945 as the Allies attempted, against the experienced resistance of 1 FJD, to take key mountains in the Apennines range.

The Allies had planned for a final major offensive in the spring of 1945 during which it was intended to capture Bologna, drive up towards the north and northeastern corner of Italy and overcome Kesselring's Army Group C before it could take refuge in the Alps. Six corps of troops were assembled for the offensive: V, X and XIII British and Polish II corps (all under the Eighth Army) and the US II and IV corps. Through a double push, US- and British-controlled forces intended to break German resistance and meet up in a pincer action northwest of Ferrara.

On 9 April the offensive started and the Eighth Army quickly pushed back the German 76th Corps. In danger of being outflanked, and with the German 10th Army's front starting to deteriorate, the *Fallschirmjäger* retreated. Following a determined delaying action by 4 FJD against New Zealand troops on 16 April, the paratroopers were eventually forced back across the River Po on 24/25 April, abandoning much of their heavy equipment and destroying their artillery pieces as they went. German forces were now squeezed further and further into the north, pursued by the US 88th Division.

By the end of April 1945 the war was nearing an end for Germany, and not just in Italy. With their defences collapsing on all fronts, on 2 May the German forces in Italy finally surrendered. The costs of fighting there had been huge for both sides. For the Germans, the sheer weight of Allied firepower and troop numbers had been overwhelming; for the Allies, they had faced many German units in Italy but few which had won their respect, or inflicted as many casualties, as the *Fallschirmjäger*.

Below: **Fallschirmjäger** ***prisoners rest on a street in northern Italy towards the end of the war. Although the Germans had been defeated, the hope of the Allies that they would find Italy the 'soft underbelly' of Hitler's Europe had been totally dashed by the fighting qualities of men such as these.***

CHAPTER 8

THE WEST

In the wake of the Allied landings in Normandy on 6 June 1944, the *Fallschirmjäger* found itself at the forefront of a desperate and ultimately futile attempt to defend the occupied territories and then Germany.

***Left:** A paratrooper motorcyclist passes through a ruined French town during the retreat from Normandy. The opening of the new front marked the end of German expansionist ambitions.*

***Above:** German paratroopers man a US Browning machine-gun, indicating the supply constraints that were starting to affect the German military machine by 1944.*

Between November 1943 and January 1944, the German airborne regiments had been formed into I. and II. *Fallschirmkorps*, both corps falling under the jurisdiction of the First Paratroop Army (I. *Fallschirmarmee*) after August 1944. It was II. *Fallschirmkorps* that was to fight in the west from the Normandy beaches to beyond the River Rhine. Expectations of an Allied invasion of France were high, so from 26 April 1944 the bulk of II. *Fallschirmkorps* was transferred down through France to occupy areas on the Brittany peninsula, concentrated around Brest – a vital naval port used extensively as a U-boat base.

The divisions of II. *Fallschirmkorps* in France consisted of (with commander and regiments): 2 FJD (Generalleutnant Ramcke – FJR 2, FJR 6 and FJR 7); 3 FJD (Generalleutnant Schimpf – FJR 5, FJR 8 and FJR 9); and 5 FJD (Generalleutnant Wilke – FJR 13, FJR 14 and FJR 15). FJR 6 (Major von der Heydte) was stationed at Periers in the Cotentin penisula, and it was the only

Above: *A* Fallschirmjäger *cameraman is covered by a comrade armed with the MP28 submachine-gun. The unit retained its good propaganda value until the very last days of the war; such cameramen sent home stirring images for public consumption.*

Right: *Heavily camouflaged, a paratrooper awaits Allied attacks. The* Fallschirmjäger*'s first actions in the Cotentin peninsula delayed the Allied advance and inflicted heavy casualties, though at an appalling cost to individual paratrooper units themselves.*

Fallschirmjäger regiment to be in the Normandy area at the time of the D-Day landings.

Normandy

On 6 June 1944 Operation Overlord hit the beaches at Normandy on the French coast. Yet even by midnight on 5 June, FJR 6 had received reports of US 82nd and 101st Airborne parachute drops north of Carentan. Marching through the night the paratroopers reached Carentan at first light and there encountered the full scale of the Allied landings.

Major von der Heydte separated FJR 6 around three objectives. The 2nd Battalion was to take St Marie-Eglise, the 1st Battalion St Marie du Mont and the 3rd Battalion Carentan itself. His regiment was to face the initial Allied onslaught without divisional backing, as FJR 2 and FJR 7 had already been sent to Brittany – even then the activity of Allied fighter-bombers and French partisans was already so heavy that these regiments did not reach their destination until 19 June.

The fighting at the Allied beachheads was intense and US and British artillery and air power inflicted heavy losses on von der Heydte's troops. On 7 June 3 FJD was sent to Normandy as reinforcements, arriving there three days later, while FJR 15 was sent directly to Carentan and the rest of 5 FJD moved to reinforce areas to the north and west of St Lô.

The first week of the invasion saw the Allies engaged in a hideously costly attempt to break out of the marshy and twisting countryside of the Cotentin peninsula. They faced not only the paratroopers but also the 77th, 91st, 243rd and 709th infantry divisions, the 206th *Panzer* Battalion and the 7th Army Storm Regiment. The paratroopers of FJR 6 put up an enormous defence although they were almost completely isolated from supplies; in doing so, I./FJR 6 was virtually wiped out and II./FJR 6 was pushed out of St Marie-Eglise. Furthermore, the *Fallschirmjäger* at Carentan, a vital point of the Allied bridgehead between Utah and Omaha beaches, started to loosen its grip. On 11 June, after the paratroopers' new command division, the 17th *Panzer Grenadier* Division, refused to reinforce them, FJR 6 could hold on no longer and started to withdraw. German resistance in the Cotentin peninsula eventually collapsed and the Allied armies surged on towards Caen.

Above: *A paratrooper waits for enemy units with his 88mm* Raketenpanzerbüchse. *The presence of* Fallschirmjäger *anti-tank artillery brigades, and the involved countryside of northern France made the area a dangerous place for Allied armour.*

In the advance to Caen, Montgomery's 21st Army Group once again ground to a halt when met with fierce resistance from elements of Kluge's Army Group B and the paratroopers of 3 FJD and 5 FJD. After the Allied 8th Corps' Operation Epsom failed to take the city at the end of June, Caen was almost completely destroyed by Allied bombing raids on 7 July and German forces evacuated the north part of the city.

With Caen on the edge of falling, the Allies then launched Operation Goodwood on 18 July in an attempt to push through to St Lô. Dempsey's US troops drove towards St Lô itself and Montgomery's focused on Falaise, but 3 FJD and 5 FJD again put up a solid defence. The US troops in particular lost large amounts of men and tanks in their advance up the road between Bayeaux and St Lô, their armour in particular slashed by the 12th *Schwere Panzerbüchse* (SP) Brigade. Yet Goodwood was accompanied with huge Allied artillery resources of its own, and FJR 9 was decimated and had to be withdrawn. The rest of the paratroopers received some reinforcements from Student's First Paratroop Army which was forming around this time, but their inexperience meant they were of little use.

***Above:** A paratrooper artillery-control man takes firing orders for the heavy gun team nearby. As the Allies gained ground, such positions became increasingly exposed to ground-attack aircraft and heavy weapons frequently had to be abandoned.*

On 27 July the next offensive towards St Lô began with Operation Cobra. A huge opening bombardment by planes and artillery eventually forced an opportunity for US armour to advance towards Coutances. The left flank of the German resistance was crushed, with FJR 14 wiped out and 3 FJD sent into retreat, and 30 July saw Avranches fall to the Allies who then took the bridge at Pontaubault. This bridge was vital in as much as it enabled the Allies to redirect a force to seize the major southern ports of St Malo, Brest and Lorient. Patton sent one corps (five divisions) of the US Third Army to do this job, part of which would meet the formidable resistance of Ramcke's 2 FJD.

Meanwhile in the north, on 7 August the Germans launched counter-attacks against Avranches and gained about 11km (7 miles) of territory (though German armoured units lost more than 40 tanks to the RAF's rocket-firing Typhoon and Hurricane aircraft). Yet the German resurgence gave the US generals Bradley and Eisenhower the opportunity to trap the Axis forces. The plan they developed was to send Crerar's First Canadian Army from its northern positions south down to Falaise and one of Patton's US

***Below:** Paratroopers load a field gun in a well-camouflaged position. Such heavy, protective camouflage was vital not only to prevent air attack, but also to avoid being targeted by the Allies own artillery observers.*

Above: *A vigilant* Fallschirmjäger *team's 20mm* Flakvierling *anti-aircraft gun. It had a practical rate of fire of around 200rpm and the advantage of being equally (or more) effective when fired against lightly armoured ground targets.*

Below: *A paratrooper peers through the optical sight of his anti-aircraft gun. The biggest threats were from aircraft such as the Hawker Typhoon, the Lockheed P-38 Lightning (the first to drop napalm in late 1944) and the North American P-51 Mustang.*

corps north from Le Mans to Argentan. The resulting pincer movement would trap some 21 German divisions in the Falaise pocket, including 3 FJD and 5 FJD.

By 16 August the Allies had achieved their objectives and the German forces started desperately to withdraw as many troops as possible before the pincers closed fully. Apart from 3 FJD and 5 FJD, also trapped was the much depleted FJR 6 (by the end of August only 40 physically fit men would remain). The paratroopers, like the rest of the German troops at Falaise, had a tortuous breakout from the Allied trap. Artillery and air attacks were constant and Allied units seemed omnipresent. The *Fallschirmjäger* eventually broke through around 20 August, but by this point all of II. *Fallschirmkorps* in the north was working with severely reduced manpower.

During the fighting in the north, Ramcke's troops in Brittany had been relatively untouched by the invasion and took the opportunity both to rest themselves and train up new recruits.

From 11 June, 2 FJD's 2nd and 7th regiments took up positions around Brest in the company of the German 25th Corps. They were tasked with the defence of the coastal area and Brest's naval citadel and Ramcke was made commander of *Festung Brest*

Left: *Consulting maps around Normandy in mid-1944. As on the Eastern Front, the paratroopers were utilised in the west mainly in unfamiliar territory in a piecemeal 'fire brigade' role.*

Below: *A vivid image of the German retreat through France. The liberation of Paris in August 1944 led to an over-confidence in Allied planning, for in the winter the Germans re-established defensive lines which proved highly resilient, especially those which featured the paratrooper units.*

('Fortress Brest'). On 2 August, as the situation worsened in the north, elements of 2 FJD were ordered up to Normandy. Unfortunately, the efficiency of Allied ULTRA intelligence gave away their movements and they were confronted with a US armoured division. The paratroopers fought an incredible defensive battle against the Americans at St Malo, resulting in around 30 US tanks being destroyed by the skilful application of *Panzerfausts* and explosive charges, but their own losses were terrible – the divisional reconnaissance battalion was wiped out and FJR 7 suffered an appalling diminution of manpower in actions in the woodland around Huelgoat.

The advance force of paratroopers was eventually pushed back and the port of Brest was surrounded. The town was beset by heavy fighting and the paratroopers even had to make audacious counter-attacks on 9 September to rescue the beleaguered 266th Infantry Division. Yet steadily the sheer weight of Allied troops shrank the German defensive perimeter. Ramcke turned down a request for a German surrender from General Middleton on 13 September, following which the Allies attacked with the full force of their aircraft, tanks, artillery and infantry. The "fortress" fell on the 20 September, with Ramcke himself being one of the very last to surrender.

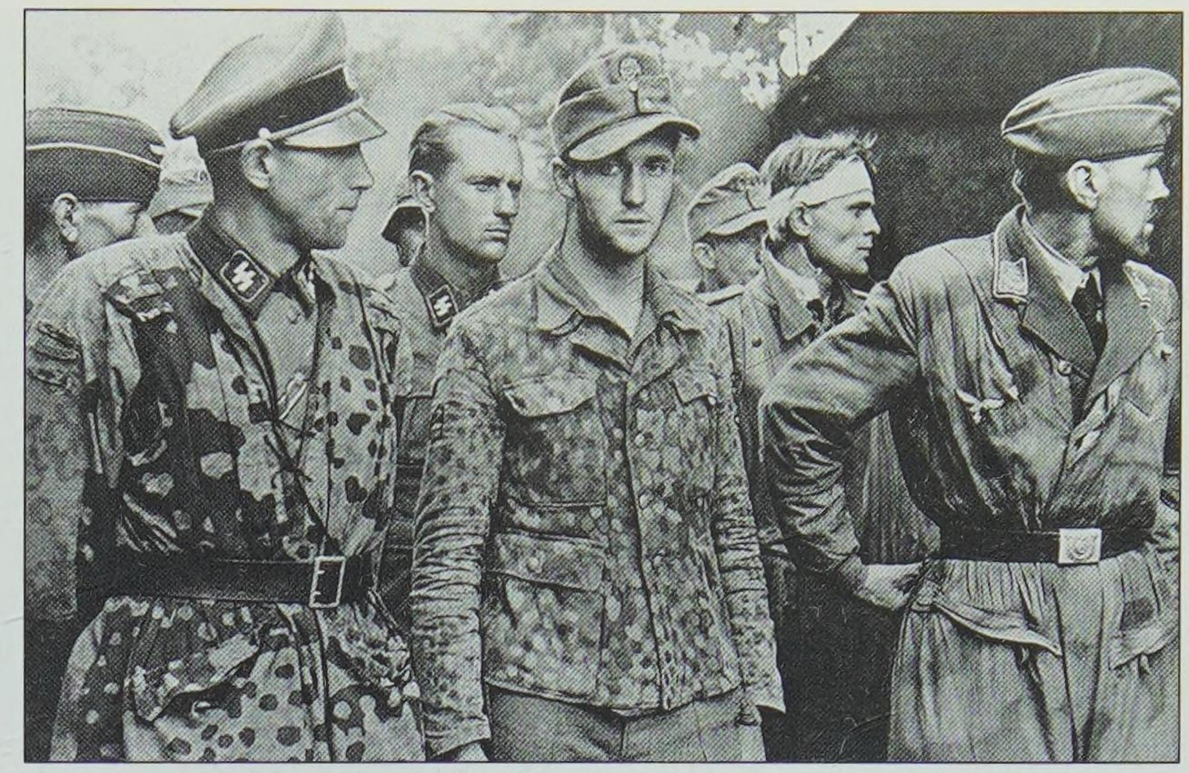
Above: *A paratrooper taken captive by members of the French Forces of the Interior in mid-August during an uprising of the French to coincide with the approach of the Allies to Paris.*

Right: *Two paratroopers stop their motorbike and sidecar in Normandy in 1944. When the Allies initially invaded, they were faced mainly by inferior German coastal divisions (except at Omaha beach). Most veteran units were based further inland.*

By the time Brest fell, the first stage of Operation Overlord was completed. The Allies were now fanning out across the rest of occupied Europe and forging on towards the Reich.

The Netherlands

Between August and September 1944 the Allies' 12th Army Group (Bradley) and 21st Army Group (Montgomery) thrust across the River Seine and headed for the German line which stretched across Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp and roughly followed the Albert Canal to Maastrict. Occupying a 96.5km (60-mile) stretch of this line west of Eindhoven was Student's First Paratroop Army – some 32 battalions strong but suffering from many incomplete units and new recruits. The paratroopers' position meant that they were ideally sited to deal with Operation Market Garden – the Allied combined air/land operations aimed at establishing an advance bridgehead at Arnhem to provide a jumping-off point for actions against the Ruhr. Battle groups from FJR 6, 3 FJD and 5 FJD fought the US 82nd Airborne Division around Nijmegen, the 101st Airborne Division north of Eindhoven and advances from the south by the 8th, 12th and 30th corps. Their resistance played a key part in ensuring that Market Garden was not a major success. Yet the Allies inched forward against the German lines and



Above: *A collection of German prisoners, mainly from SS units. Relations between the SS and the* Fallschirmjäger *deteriorated during the Ardennes campaign when the SS Standartenführer Joachim Peiper commandeered I./FJR 9.*

steadily the structural coherence of the First Paratroop Army started to loosen as whole battalions were lost and the army split in two. On 8 February the Allies' Operation Veritable finally pushed through the Siegfried Line and, assisted by the US 9th Army's Operation Grenade, the Allies reached the lower Rhine.

The Ardennes

The Ardennes campaign (December 1944 to January 1945) was Germany's last-ditch attempt to dominate the front in the west. The surprise offensive aimed to drive through Belgium and capture Antwerp, splitting the Allies in two and depriving them of a vital northern port. The offensive was launched on 16 December in terrible winter weather – a deliberate choice to restrict Allied air operations. The German invasion front consisted of the 7th Army (south), 5th *Panzerarmee* (centre) and 6th SS *Panzerarmee* (north).

The *Fallschirmjäger* was used in both conventional and special operation roles. FJR 3 and FJR 5 were used as support infantry while a special battle group under Oberstleutnant von der Heydte was assembled by taking 100 men from each battalion of the First Paratroop Army. This battle group was to work in conjunction with the 6th SS *Panzerarmee* and several commando units under Otto Skorzeny innocuously known as 150 *Panzer* Brigade.

Von der Heydte's mission was to parachute his force 11km (6.8 miles) north of Malmédy in advance of the main offensive and hold the road between Eupen and Malmédy against Allied reinforcements, awaiting the relief of an SS *Panzer* Group under the infamous Joachim Peiper. The weather and the forces against them made this an exceptionally dangerous mission. A deployment time of 0430 on the morning of the offensive was delayed

Left: **Fallschirmjäger** *prisoners-of-war from 2 FJD captured at Brest on 9 September 1944. Although many were taken prisoner there, elements of II./FJR 2 still managed to push through the Allied trap and escape into the French interior.*

Below: *A paratrooper inspects a wrecked US Waco CG-4A Hadrian glider. Allied airborne forces were used extensively from D-Day onwards, and their tactical application was partly due to the Allies having been impressed by German airborne operations.*

Above: *The towns of France were major strategic stepping stones for the Allied advance after 6 June 1944. The overriding job for the paratroopers was to delay this progress at all costs, a function which accounts for their extremely high casualty rate.*

until midnight owing to organisational problems, but even when finally airborne, in a flight of over 100 aircraft, the paratroopers' problems continued. Bad weather, anti-aircraft fire and inexperienced pilots meant that only 10 Junkers Ju-52s reached the designated drop area, and once on the ground von der Heydte managed to gather just 125 men from his scattered force. Blizzard conditions prevailed in the Ardennes forest, so exposure started to take its toll. The unit, which eventually expanded to 300 men, also had little weaponry because of lost containers. Encircled by US troops, the only option was withdrawal. After a costly attempt at a mass breakout, von der Heydte split his men up into small groups of two or three and ordered them to escape. Von der Heydte himself, suffering from a broken arm sustained during the parachute drop, surrendered to the Allies at Monschau on 23 December.

Meanwhile, 3 FJD was fighting in support of the 6th SS *Panzerarmee*, their objectives being to clear the Berterath-Mandersfeld sector for SS passage through to Maas and Antwerp. At the centre of the attack was FJR 9, to the south FJR 8 and to the north the 5th *Jäger* Regiment. The attack went in against very heavy resistance from the US V Corps, and by the end of the first day the 6th SS *Panzerarmee* was only at Losheim (the 9th had meant to push through Losheim and on to Moederscheid). Ill-feeling soon developed between Peiper and FJR 9 – he had even commandeered the 1st Battalion and physically drove it further into battle on his Tiger tanks. Yet by Christmas all progress had stopped.

Top: *As German vehicles became scarcer because of Allied air attacks, improvised transport – even for small items – became more commonplace. This picture was taken around the Arnhem corridor in September 1944 during Operation Market Garden.*

Above: *Paratroopers drive through a devastated French town. The Allies preceded attacks with huge artillery bombardments, and such was the quality of the target acquisition and range that it was a dominant cause of paratrooper fatalities in the west.*

Initially good progress in the offensive had been made by 5 FJD, yet it stalled following heavy fighting at Nachthanderscheid and Walsdorf. In the northern front, however, the *Panzer Lehr* Division's continual advances meant that the whole German front was becoming dangerously skewed.

By 22 December the offensive had ground to a halt and von Runstedt made a withdrawal request to Hitler. Hitler refused, and as the weather cleared the German troops felt the full force of Allied aircraft attacks (on 23 December alone the Allies flew 1200 sorties). Furthermore, German fuel supplies were running precariously low. 5 FJD now came under progressively heavy punishment from the US Third Army, eventually being pushed back to Bastogne. This was already in the hands of the US 101st Airborne Division and the Germans now encircled the city. FJD 5 and the 14th *Jäger* Regiment resisted Patton's attempts to relieve Bastogne with the 4th US Armoured Division, but on 26 December it was liberated, FJD 5 having fought a terrible close-quarters battle with the Shermans of the US 37th Tank Battalion. On 5 January General Hodge's 7th Corps, which had been at the centre of the Ardennes offensive, turned its attack southwards with the aim of reaching Patton's troops at Houffalize and trapping any remaining Axis forces. With defeat looming, the paratroopers joined the Germans' general retreat eastwards out from the Ardennes.

Above, left: *A paratrooper receives attention from two civilian nurses for a severe arm wound. Wounded troops became a major problem for all German units during the retreat in the west. Because of a collapse of medical services and the need for fast long-distance withdrawals, many German injured were left behind for Allied medical services to deal with.*

Above, right: *An injured paratrooper talks with his colleague. Most German divisions during World War II had two medical companies which could provide two field hospitals, four dressing stations and four casualty clearing stations. These were not only kept busy by battle casualties, but also by the illness and disease which prevailed as the German infrastructure collapsed.*

Opposite, top: *A soldier fits a rifle grenade to his* Kar *98k rifle. Although these projectiles were designed for anti-tank use they were ineffective against all but the thinnest of armour.*

Left: *A group of paratrooper anti-aircraft gunners keep watch behind their half-track-mounted 30mm* Flugabwehrkanone *103/38, its muzzle levelled in a ground-defence position. The paratroopers received some 20 AA batteries to support them against Allied air-attacks and airborne assault.*

As well as the Ardennes offensive, the *Fallschirmjäger* had also been involved with Operation *Nordwind* (North Wind), the German 19th Army's attempts to push out from the Rhine and reoccupy northern Alsace while defeating the US Seventh Army there. Launched on 1 January 1945, *Nordwind* had 7 FJD in its vanguard. As in many of the late war campaigns, the paratroopers initially had great success. Their main opponents in the sector were the US 79th Division which contained many raw recruits easily overcome by the experienced paratroopers. But, inevitably, the Allies soon provided massive reinforcements and by March all German forces were being forced deeper into Germany towards the River Rhine.

The Allied advance to the Rhine was considerably delayed by *Fallschirmjäger* tenacity. After the First Paratroop Army imposed heavy costs on Operation Veritable – an Allied offensive to drive the Germans from the lower Netherlands to the lower Rhine – most of the paratrooper units were focused in the defence of the Reichswald region. Allied casualties were hideous as they attempted to uproot FJD 7, FJR 16 and FJR 20, but gradually the weight of British divisions started to push back the Reichswald defences.

Most paratroopers now retreated and redrew their defensive lines despite additional losses. In mid-February, a redeployment order from Hitler meant that only 7 FJD remained as the paratrooper contingent on the Reichswald Front. Further Allied assaults between the Maas and the Rhine rivers were hotly contested by the paratroopers, with units such as FJR 2 and the 12th SP Brigade delivering huge firepower in several days of fighting at Affrenden against the British 52nd (Lowland) Division and the 34th Armoured Brigade (which lost around 300 vehicles). Yet gradually the whole German front collapsed and the paratroopers

Left: *A German soldier takes a momentary break behind a knocked-out Sherman tank on 17 December 1944 during the Battle of the Bulge. This is one a series of images taken from German troops captured by Allied soldiers of the US 3rd Armoured Division.*

Right: Fallschirmjäger *eat by the side of their 20mm* Flak *38 anti-aircraft weapon. These AA units were almost impotent in the face of the tide of Allied air power which was directed at German forces during late 1944 and 1945. The strafing and rocketing of supply columns heading to the front meant that it was impossible for the Germans to maintain a prolonged counter-offensive.*

Below: *A column of US prisoners is escorted by* Fallschirmjäger. *Even though the tide of war had turned against them by late 1944, the German forces still regularly acquired large numbers of Allied captives. Thousand were taken during the Ardennes campaign alone. The Allies, however, could replace their manpower losses.*

executed a fighting retreat all the way back to the Rhine. By the end of the first week of March, the last paratroopers to remain on the west side of the Rhine (FJR 18 and the First Paratroop Army's Assault Battalion) crossed to the east at Bruedrich. For them the battle of Germany itself had begun.

The fall of Germany

It is difficult to give a full account of the *Fallschirmjäger* in the very last months of the war. In the west especially, units were continually disintegrating and being reformed or absorbed into other regiments and divisions. The campaigns which led up to the crossing of the Rhine had decimated the *Fallschirmjäger* ranks. 5 FJD, for example, had been all but destroyed in Normandy and the Ardennes (the rest would eventually be captured near Nürburgring); most of 3 FJD had been killed or captured in defence of the Rhine. The remainder of the First Paratroop Army was being pushed back into the northeast corner of Germany by the First Canadian, Second British and Ninth US armies.

***Above:** A paratrooper holding a* **Panzerfaust** *and two regular infantrymen are seen fighting in Germany's industrial heartland in March 1945. The mixed units are indicative of the structural disintegration of the German forces by this late stage of the war.*

Once across the Rhine, the First Paratroop Army initially held positions between Arnhem and Wessel as part of Army Group H, but with the Allied advance crossing the river on 24 March the paratroopers were soon on a fast retreat north. Together, 6 FJD, 8 FJD and the 16th, 17th and 18th *Jäger* regiments produced a dogged resistance on the east bank of the Rhine as a rearguard action for all the retreating paratroopers.

Above: *Two paratroopers fire a powerful MG42 machine-gun against British soldiers at the end of February 1945. By this time Soviet forces had crossed the Oder and were heading for Berlin.*

Below: Fallschirmjäger *attempt to keep their dignity as they retreat through Copenhagen's Town Hall Square following the landing of British airborne forces in Denmark on 5 May 1945.*

Many of II. *Fallschirmkorps*' remaining troops finally surrendered only some 50km (31 miles) south of the border of Denmark near Schleswig (7 FJD had already been captured near Oldenburg). However, scattered and isolated paratrooper units fought on until the bitter end throughout Germany. For example, 2 FJD, which had been newly raised in December 1944 after its defeat at Brest, was destroyed in the Ruhr pocket during the US offensives codenamed 'Voyage' and 'Plunder'; the remainder of 3 FJD was also captured in the Ruhr.

No doubt small groups of paratroopers were engaged in the western theatre until the fall of Berlin, but in the chaotic last days of the Third Reich many of their stories will go untold. With the total German collapse on both fronts, and the capture of Berlin, the *Fallschirmjäger*'s war ended.

CHAPTER 9

SPECIALIST OPERATIONS

Although mainly used as ground troops from 1941 onwards, the paratroopers would still perform specialist airborne operations after that – including the extraordinary rescue of Mussolini from his mountain prison.

***Left:** Clad in his* Luftwaffe *camouflage smock and carrying the revolutionary FG42 assault rifle, a paratrooper poses in front of a DFS-230 glider after Mussolini's rescue on the Gran Sasso.*

***Above:** A team of* Fallschirmjäger *advances across the Gran Sasso towards Mussolini's hotel prison in Operation* Eiche *(Oak), part of Hitlers plan to restore fascist government to Italy.*

Of all the specialist airborne operations during World War II, it is the *Fallschirmjäger*'s rescue of Mussolini on the Gran Sasso that has gone down as one of the most memorable. Politically and militarily daring, this act demonstrated the *Fallschirmjäger*'s elite capabilities in small unit rapid-reaction roles, though ironically it would be the group of SS commandos under the leadership of SS-Obersturmführer Otto Skorzeny who would take popular credit for the success of the mission. The political complexities surrounding the fall of Mussolini and the Italian armistice on 8 September drew the paratroopers into several specialist operations in the autumn of 1943. Furthermore, early 1944 was to see lightning airborne operations performed against Marshal Tito's partisan headquarters in Yugoslavia. Such dramatic missions remind us that even late in the war airborne deployment remained a powerful resource for Hitler to express his political and military will.

Above: **Fallschirmjäger** *prepare for the rescue of Mussolini. They deployed in the company of soldiers from Skorzeny's Friedenthal Battalion and a pro-German Italian officer, General Soletti, to be used in any negotiations and to stop unnecessary violence.*

Monte Rotondo

By the beginning of September 1943 Hitler and his senior staff were fully expecting Italy to capitulate to the Allies and effectively become Germany's opponent. Mussolini had been removed from power on 25 July and replaced with Marshal Badoglio, who began secret peace talks with the Allies.

One of the primary counter-measures taken by the Germans upon the declaration of the armistice was to send 2 FJD and the 3rd *Panzer Grenadier* Division to disarm the Italian garrison in Rome (see page 111). Yet almost simultaneous with this was a secret paratrooper operation to capture the Italian high command at their base on Monte Rotondo, situated to the northwest of Rome. Prior to his expulsion Mussolini had effectively coordinated all military branches of the high command. With him gone Hitler was eager to remove the head of a potential Italian military command structure before any Italian-German conflict began. Student was briefed by Hitler on 25 July and by early September he was gathering troops and information for the mission.

Assaulting Monte Rotondo was a challenge. At 150m (500ft) high the HQ complex was surrounded by an integrated defence system which included anti-aircraft guns, infantry artillery and a network of trenches for the defending garrison. However, the exact details were still sketchy. On 5 September Student had met with Major Walther Gericke, who was given the Monte Rotondo mission to accomplish with his troops of II./FJR 6. Gericke was determined to discover the full composition of the Italian defences and he conducted very personal acts of reconnaissance. First he actually flew over Monte Rotondo in a Fieseler Storch, which quickly attracted anti-aircraft fire. Feigning compliance with the Italian aggression (by waggling the wings) he still managed to idle over the area long enough to gain valuable aerial observation.

Yet this was still not good enough for Gericke. With extraordinary confidence, he actually drove up to the gates of Monte Rotondo. Inventing a fictitious regiment for himself, he pretended to be a commander looking for a way to navigate around Monte

Rotondo without clashing with Italian troops. After he had consulted with Italian guards and senior officers he was escorted back down the mountain having managed to take in many details of the defensive layout.

Gericke's parachute operation was launched on 8 September when II./FJR 5 in its entirety took to the skies in 52 Junkers Ju-52 transporters. The drop zone was directly over the headquarters. As the group approached anti-aircraft fire became heavy and inflicted the first casualties on Gericke's men. The force was further depleted when entire planeloads of men were dropped off course – some more than three kilometres (two miles) away.

Above: **Fallschirmjäger** *on Gran Sasso, illustrating the precarious terrain which the gliders had to negotiate in their landing. The gliders even had to refrain from using their braking parachutes so as to make their approach as silent and stealthy as possible.*

The paratroopers that did touch down faced some heavy resistance from small arms and machine-gun fire, yet Gericke himself led a dedicated group of *Fallschirmjäger* directly towards the HQ building. It was quickly inside and managed to reach the well-defended tower which contained the high command staff. After a short, hard fight the building was taken with the capture of over

200 men, including 15 senior officers. However, the chief of staff himself, General Rotta, had already made his escape just prior to the operation and had gone to Pescara.

The HQ was now in *Fallschirmjäger* hands, but the operation was not over. In the afternoon it was discovered that an Italian armoured division was moving towards Monte Rotondo with the intention of mounting a counter-attack. Gericke was in no position to resist a force of this size, and so subsequent negotiations between Student, Kesselring and the Italian authorities led to a truce, an exchange of prisoners and the guarantee of safe passage to Rome for the paratroopers.

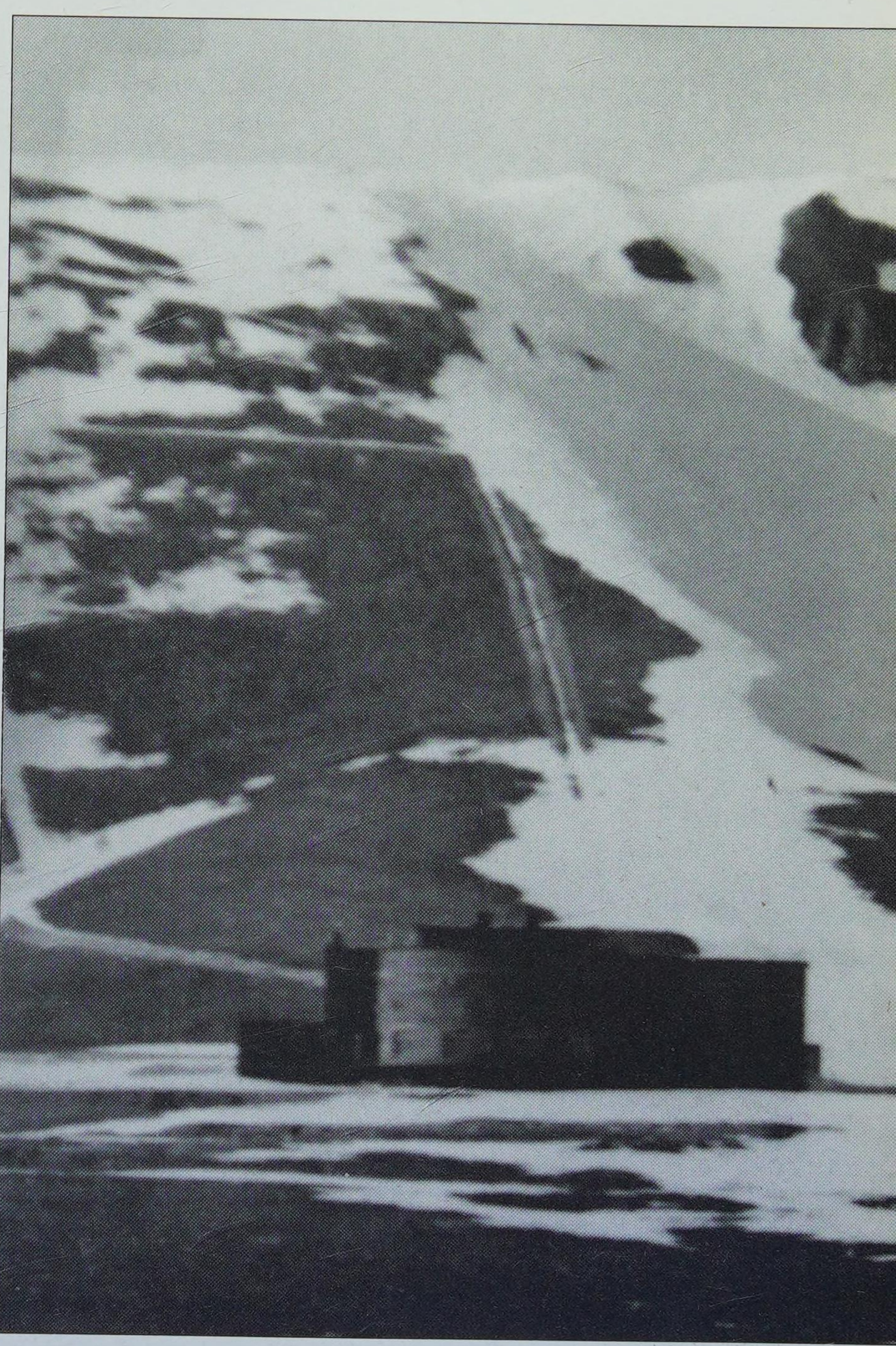
Gran Sasso

Despite his fall, Mussolini was still important to Hitler. Not only was there a certain pact of friendship between the two dictators, but Hitler also intended to make Mussolini head of an Italian Social Republic (actually little more than a figurehead position) through Operation Student, the restoration of Mussolini's rule

coinciding with German occupation of Italy. On 25/26 July Hitler met with Student and gave him two responsibilities: subdue the Rome garrison and discover the whereabouts of Mussolini with a view to the rescue operation.

Accompanying Student for the latter was one SS-Obersturmführer Otto Skorzeny and his SS commando group of around 40 men. Skorzeny worked for the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Security Main Office, or RSHA) in charge of the organisation and use of special commando units called *Friedenthales Jadgverbände* (Friedenthal Hunting Groups). His relationship with Student would not be a good one, particularly later on when, following the successful rescue of Mussolini, he and his men took the entire credit for the mission.

A primary problem for Student was the actual location of Mussolini. An initial lead – a spotting by a German officer on the Pontine islands – indicated Ponza off the west coast of Italy, then Maddelena off the northeast coast of Sardinia. Finally, radio signals intercepted from Italian forces indicated that a VIP was being



Above: *The Albergo-Rifugio Campo Imperatore on the Gran Sasso, the site of Mussolini's imprisonment. The area in front of the complex was targeted in advance as the landing zone, but aerial reconnaissance had failed to reveal the rocks covering most of its surface which would make for a problematic glider landing.*

Left: *A group of paratroopers stop for a moment during their advance towards the cable car station in the valley. The road up the mountain was not a viable route for Mussolini's evacuation because of partisans and the possibility of Italian reinforcements.*

held in the Albergo-Rifugio Campo Imperatore, a hotel complex situated on the Gran Sasso mountain some 128km (80 miles) northeast of Rome in the Abruzzi range. Further inquiries found that this person was almost certainly Mussolini. Student was informed of this on 10 September and immediately started to draw up Operation *Eiche* (Oak).

The Gran Sasso (literally 'Big Rock') is the highest mountain in Italy south of the Alps, reaching 2912m (9557ft). Mussolini's prison, in the Albergo-Rifugio, was near the summit ; ironically, its construction had been ordered by Mussolini in the 1930s to encourage fitness activities among the Italians. It was accessible only by a long and exhausting climb or by a dedicated cable car which rose high from the valley floor. Student, however, had other access routes in mind.

The men selected for the rescue were the No.1 Company, 1st Battalion *Fallschirm Lehr Battalion* (Paratroop Training Battalion) commanded by Major Mors. Accompanying them would be Otto Skorzeny and his men who were intended to operate more in a police role. The deployment method proved a difficult choice. A parachute drop was out because of high mountain winds, and both the climb and the cable car would be too laborious and would probably lose the element of surprise. Eventually it was decided to deliver the operation by gliders, which could approach silently and land on a patch of open ground in front of the hotel itself. While the glider group went in under the command of Oberleutnant Georg von Berlepsch, the remaining troops (with Major Mors) would occupy the airfield at Acquila and the funicular railway in the valley to prevent Italian reinforcement.

Above: **Fallschirmjäger** *take up covering positions on the slopes of the Gran Sasso. The SS took the vanguard of the rescue while the paratroopers took much of the responsibility for the planning. Ironically, the fact that Skorzeny insisted on sharing the plane with Mussolini provided perhaps the greatest danger to him of all.*

No one knew how long Mussolini would be kept on the Gran Sasso, so there was much urgency. The operation date was set at 12 September, and on that morning gliders from Grosseto assembled on the airfield at Practica di Mare, only a short flying distance from the mountain. Only then were the pilots briefed. There were 12 Gotha DFS-230 gliders in all for the paratroopers and the SS commandos, the paratroopers' company HQ occupying the first two gliders (Skorzeny himself was in the third).

At 1300 on 12 September the operation began (Major Mors and the group were due to occupy the cable car station at 1400), though it was two gliders short owing to their damage upon take-off. The commander of the tow aircraft, Hauptmann Langgruth, had been concerned that the short one-hour flight to the mountain meant that they would not be able to gain enough height before glider release. Feeling that his fears were coming true, he broke off with the first group of gliders to perform a height-gaining orbit and became detached in the poor visibility. He expected the others to follow, but that was not the case and so Skorzeny found himself in what was now the lead glider.

***Below:** The Albergo-Rifugio Campo Imperatore complex near the summit of Gran Sasso, some time after the rescue of Mussolini. Its inaccessibility was intentional as it was built to serve those climbers who had worked their way up arduously on foot.*

It was left to the remaining gliders to carry through the operation. The landing zone was particularly dangerous – the expected meadow turned out to be a patch of rough, steep ground which ended in a precipitous drop. One glider crash-landed, injuring all inside, but Skorzeny's craft skidded to a stop directly in front of the hotel doors. He was first into the building and quickly reached Mussolini's room. The two Italian guards at the door offered no resistance and Mussolini was rescued while other elements of Skorzeny's men liberated members of Mussolini's family. The whole operation had taken only a few minutes.

Mors had now travelled up to the summit in the cable car. Ironically, now that Mussolini was rescued he faced his greatest danger. Two Fieseler Storch aircraft were dedicated to Mussolini's evacuation. One, flown by Student's personal pilot, Hauptmann Gerlach, was to fly Mussolini directly from the summit to Practica di Mare. The other was to take Skorzeny from the valley floor to the same destination. However, Skorzeny's aircraft was damaged and he insisted on flying in the first Storch with Mussolini. This dangerously overloaded the light aircraft, but Skorzeny was insistent. After a dramatic downhill take-off assisted by full revs and a push from the *Fallschirmjäger*, the plane managed make a safe flight and put down at its destination.

The rescue of Mussolini was an amazing propaganda coup for the Germans. *Signal* dedicated a cover article to the event and

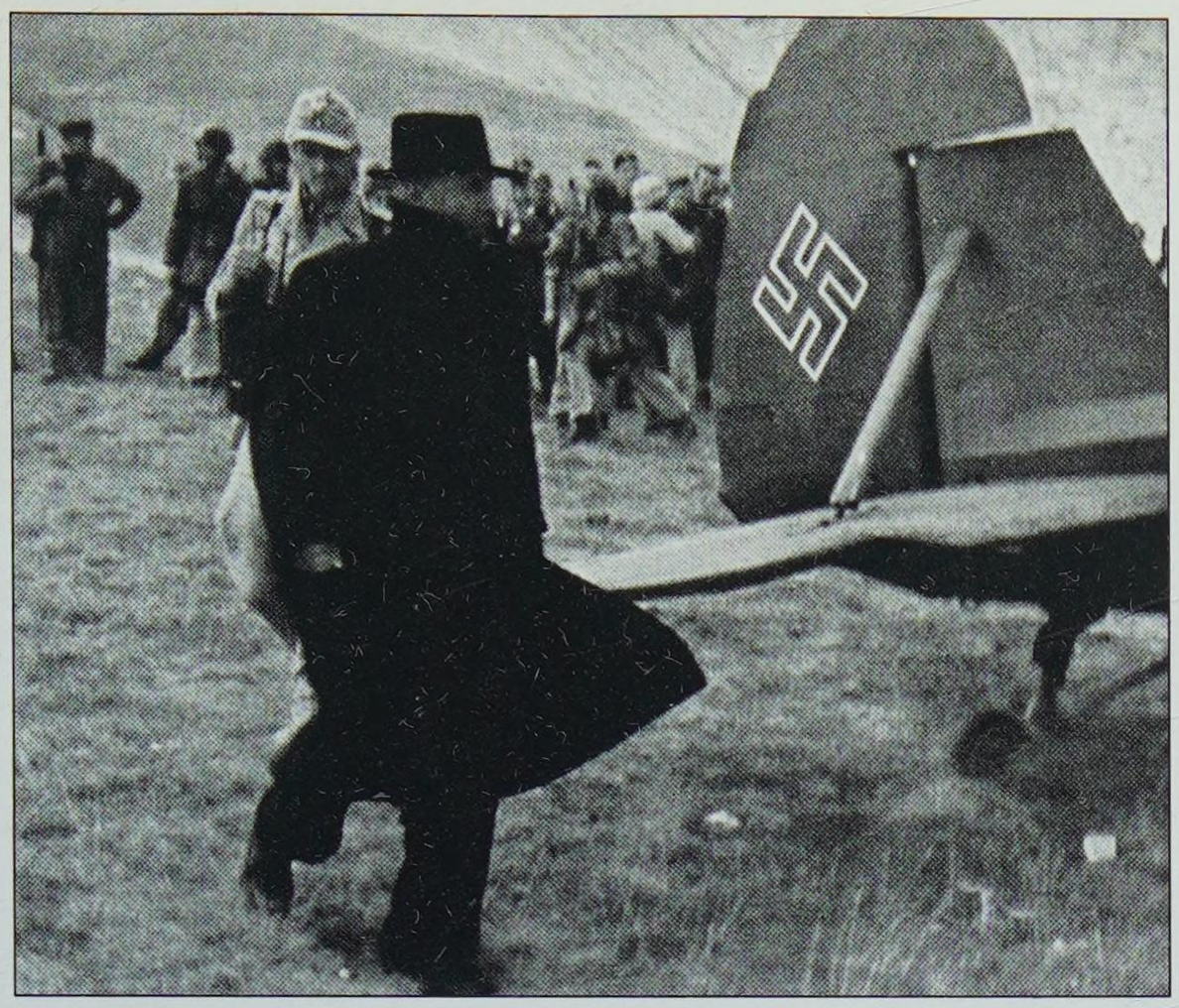
published dramatic photos of both the rescue and the heroic participants. Yet it was Otto Skorzeny and his SS soldiers who received all the acknowledgements. Skorzeny himself was awarded the Knight's Cross while the paratroopers who actually organised and participated in the execution of the mission were almost entirely overlooked. But once Hitler had endorsed the publicity there was no remedy to the situation.

Against Tito

In 1943 the *Fallschirmjäger* performed several other airborne operations at places such as Leros and Kos in the Mediterranean theatre. Yet one of the most distinctive specialist missions came early in 1944, and fell under the jurisdiction of a newly formed SS *Fallschirmjäger* Battalion.

The SS *Fallschirmjäger* 500 Battalion was created in Chlum, Czechoslovakia, in October 1943 and was composed of both veteran SS volunteers and SS military criminals commanded by SS-Sturmbannführer Herbert Gilhofer. The penal elements of the battalion, usually from the prisons at Danzig-Matzkau and Dachau, were restored to their previous ranks and given the chance to redeem themselves through special operations. The first of these came in May 1944.

In Yugoslavia the communist partisans of Josip Broz, otherwise known as Marshal Tito, had been waging a vicious and unrelenting guerrilla war of resistance against the occupying German forces since June 1941. By early 1944 the Jugoslav National Army of Liberation (JANL) numbered well over 10,000 men and the Germans, fearing that the Allies might invade the Balkans, decided to act decisively against the partisans so that they could not provide pre- or post-invasion support. Furthermore, the partisans had now grown so strong that they were making worrying territorial gains on their own.



Left: *Mussolini is guided to his aircraft following his liberation from the hotel on Gran Sasso. After his release, Mussolini was flown to the Practica di Mare near Rome, then taken to Vienna to be with his family. On 15 September both he and Skorzeny flew out to meet Hitler in East Prussia where Skorzeny received official approbation for the rescue, much to the chagrin of a great many* Fallschirmjäger.

Below: *Fascist salutes form a send-off for Mussolini's flight from the top of the Gran Sasso. The aftermath of the rescue was well covered by German journalists and photographers who had been brought to the summit via the cable car once the action was over. It enabled Hitler to exploit the enormous propaganda value of the operation – films of the rescue were played in Germany and it was the cover story for many prominent publications.*

Above: *Members of the SS* **Fallschirmjäger** *500 Battalion advance up to their positions through the Bosnian town of Drvar. The concept of an SS paratrooper unit was conceived back in 1937, but it was not until 1943 that the idea bore fruit.*

Tito's headquarters was situated on a hillside plateau near the Bosnian town of Drvar. Its natural and military defences were formidable. Tito's actual HQ was based in a deep cave between the hills over the town (which removed the possibility of using ground-attack aircraft) and he was protected outside by 12,000 heavily armed and experienced partisan soldiers. The 600 men of SS *Fallschirmjäger* 500 Battalion were tasked with taking this objective plus destroying the various Allied military missions which were present around the site. The force was separated into six groups and objectives: Panther Group – Tito's HQ; Griefer – the British Military Mission; Sturmer – the Soviet Military Mission; Brecher – the US Military Mission; Daufnanger – the intelligence and signal units; and Breisser – the radio station. The entire battalion fell under the command of SS-Hauptsturmführer Kurt Rybaka.

Because of a shortage of aircraft, the plan was for a two-wave parachute drop of SS *Fallschirmjäger* 500 Battalion following an encirclement operation by the German XV *Gebirgs* Corps (7th SS *Gebirgs Division* and 1st *Gebirgs Division*) and the 373rd Infantry Division (Croatian), one wave going in at 0700 and the following wave around 1200. Once the objective was taken, the encirclement troops were then to close in as reinforcements.

Known as Operation *Unternehmen Roesselsprung* (Knight's Move), the action was launched on 25 May. The first drop, some 314 paratroopers, landed successfully and quickly occupied the town of Drvar without significant resistance. A further assault group of 300 men was then airlanded by glider, six of which (Panther Group) came to rest directly in front of Tito's cave itself. This landing zone was ferociously protected, and by the time the

other groups from the town reached the main objective the 110 soldiers of Panther Group had almost been wiped out.

The following attacks on the cave complex by the paratroopers resulted in little headway and appalling casualties. The partisans put up a hail of rifle, machine-gun and mortar fire, into which the midday reinforcements were dropped and received many killed and wounded. Despite regrouping and making further attacks against the stronghold, Rybaka pulled his men back into the town cemetery to await their relief. This should have come from the 373rd Infantry Division, but it made no appearance. Consequently, the paratroopers had to fight alone through the night of 25/26 May against the now reinforced partisans who launched continual counter-attacks.

Eventually relief did come in the form of a unit from 13th Regiment, 7th SS *Gebirgs Division* 'Prinz Eugen' and the battle was over for the SS *Fallschirmjäger* 500 Battalion. They had fought with enormous courage, but more than 600 of the battalion's 800 men had been killed or wounded. Furthermore, Tito had escaped early in the operation and was heading for the Yugoslavian coast by railway.

After the Drvar action the SS *Fallschirmjäger* 500 Battalion saw further action in Yugoslavia before being deployed to the Eastern Front and later in operations to relieve the German forces trapped in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. After this action the battalion was renamed the *Fallschirmjäger* 600 Battalion in November 1944, and it no longer accepted military criminals into its ranks. Its final campaigns were involved in holding up the Russian advance, though two companies also took part in the Ardennes offensive as part of Skorzeny's 150th *Panzer* Brigade. They eventually surrendered to US troops around Berlin in early May 1945.

The actions at Monte Rotondo, Gran Sasso and Drvar illustrate the elite tactical nature of the *Fallschirmjäger* for use in special operations. Its standards of training and vast experience enabled its men to survive in acutely hostile environments, though in the case of the attack on Drvar their capabilities were perhaps overjudged. Yet the scale of Allied advances made on both major fronts in the west and east in the latter part of the war meant that specialist actions such as these became an increasingly rare portion of the *Fallschirmjäger* responsibility.

***Below:** Paratroopers take up a defensive role during the bloody battle to capture Tito. The partisans' good supplies of weaponry, generally efficient chain of command and their commitment to their leader combined to produce very high SS casualties.*

5cm
5cm
5cm PaK38
5cm Mun C250F
5cm Mun C250F

CHAPTER 10

WEAPONS AND EQUIPMENT

The unique nature of airborne operations inspired items of weaponry and equipment which were purpose-designed and actually advanced the boundaries of military technology.

***Left:** The enormous logistics involved with airborne operations is apparent here as paratroopers load up a Ju-52 transport aircraft with air-drop canisters, ammunition for a* Pak *38 field gun and other combat and survival supplies.*

***Above:** The paratrooper in the centre of this photograph carries a 7.92mm* Panzerbüsche *39 anti-tank rifle. The rifle fired tungsten-cored projectiles which could penetrate 25mm (1in) of armour at a range of 300m (1000ft).*

The *Fallschirmjäger* operations in World War II placed contradictory demands on weapons and equipment inventories. On the one hand, the paratroopers had to be able to take sufficient firepower into the battlefield arena to make their action decisive and forceful; on the other hand, the operational tools available to them were severely constricted by the load-carrying limits of both paratrooper and glider.

When on a parachute operation, the individual *Fallschirmjäger* would jump from the plane with virtually no personal carrying capacity whatsoever apart from one or two webbing pouches and some uniform pockets. If the paratroopers were deployed in gliders, the cramped hold and aerodynamic limits of a Gotha DFS-230 meant that only 275kg (606lb) of equipment could be carried alongside 10 men.

Above: *Paratroopers on the Adriatic front. The man on the right holds a* Panzerfaust. *This anti-tank rocket launcher entered service with German forces in 1943 and could destroy most Allied armour if used with precision and within 30m (100ft).*

Left: Fallschirmjäger *uniforms got more and more elements of standard* Wehrmacht *dress as the war went on. This dishevelled soldier, however, retains the distinctive paratrooper helmet which visually marked them out from other German units.*

The contradiction was perhaps one which was never fully overcome, particularly in respect of the need for infantry artillery pieces and anti-aircraft guns. However, the superb technical resources of German companies such as Rheinmetall and Krupp did produce some innovative solutions to many problems of deployment and firepower. On the ground there was often little to distinguish the paratroopers' equipment from the standard *Wehrmacht* issue, but specialist items did emerge which not only increased the fighting potential of the *Fallschirmjäger*, but also affected equipment and weaponry design for the remainder of the twentieth century.

Uniforms

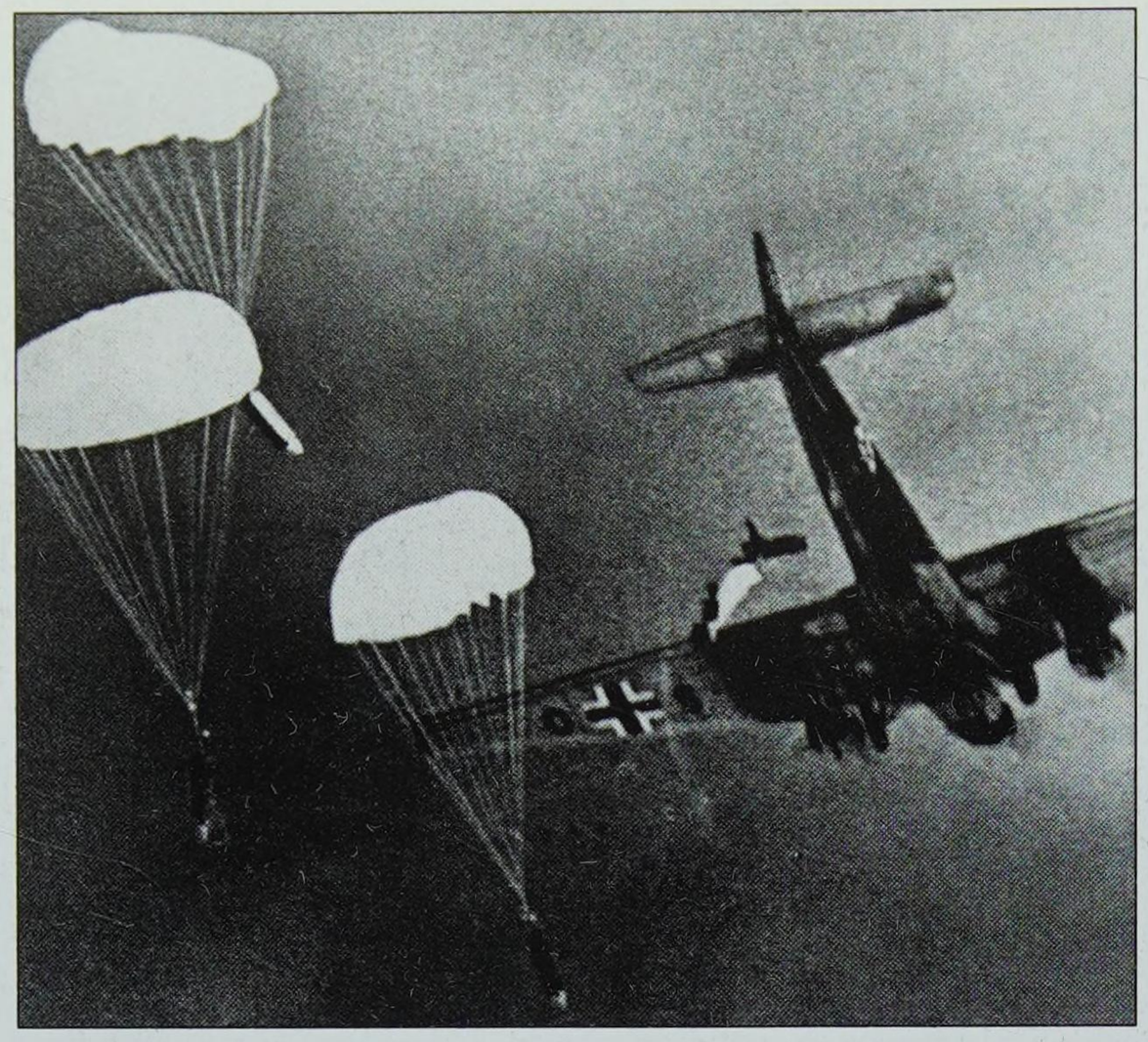
Although this volume does not focus on the development of *Fallschirmjäger* uniforms and insignia, it is worth mentioning some of the specific elements of paratrooper dress which had an

Above: *Paratroopers in training check their parachute fitting in March 1944. By this time four versions of* Fallschirmjäger *parachute had been produced, though the RZ20 was the most commonplace from 1941 onwards.*

Right: *This MP40-armed paratrooper wears the 12-pouch ammunition bandolier unique to the* Fallschirmjäger *and carries a holstered sidearm. The sidearm was usually the 9mm Luger P08 pistol or the 7.65mm Sauer* Modell *38 (H) pistol.*

obvious effect on the equipment carried. Protective clothing is essential for any parachute jump and for the *Fallschirmjäger* that started with a set of ankle-length boots. These had thick rubber soles which were comfortable, though not suitable for long marches, and gave good adhesion in aircraft interiors (thus they omitted the hobnails often found on *Wehrmacht*-issue boots). Initially these were laced at the side to avoid them snagging on parachute cords, but this was found to be unnecessary and after the Crete operations in 1941 the boots returned to traditional front lacing.

Over the paratrooper's combat uniform would be worn a thigh-length waterproof gabardine smock. This went through several variations and was intended to give additional weatherproof protection in jump conditions and a more suitable item of clothing over which to wear the harness. As landing posed a serious danger to a paratrooper's well-being, pads were worn over both elbows and knees. The legs of the combat uniform featured small slits at



Above: *Supply containers fall from a Ju-52. The* Fallschirmjäger *was reliant on such containers in combat, while their Allied opposites jumped with large bags dangling from their harnesses.*

Right: Fallschirmjäger *troops master the use of the reliable MP38/40 at an airfield in Norway. The MP38 and its successors were easy and cheap to produce, and had a cyclic rate of fire of 500rpm. Even Allied troops were eager to obtain these weapons.*

Below: *Three paratroopers split open a container. Weapons' retrieval was an exposed time and meant that for some minutes the soldiers could be left unarmed before an enemy who knew that the container would draw their opponents into the open.*

the side of the knees through which kapok-filled canvas pads were inserted. A further level of protection was provided by the wearing of external knee pads made from leather-covered sponge rubber and secured by straps. (Both pads and smock were usually taken off after landing, though sometimes the smock was retained underneath the webbing.) The trousers also featured a small pocket just above the knee to hold the essential 'gravity knife' (see page 163).

Perhaps the most important item of protective clothing for both jump and combat was the distinctive paratrooper helmet. This was basically a standard German infantry helmet with the neck and ear shields removed, a well padded interior and a tight-fitting chin strap.

Because in most cases the paratrooper would have to fight for some time without resupply, the ability to carry large amounts of

ammunition was vital. A custom-designed *Fallschirmjäger* ammunition bandolier was issued which had 12 pockets divided in the middle by a canvas strap, this being worn around the neck with the bandolier hanging vertically down both sides of the chest. The bandolier enabled the paratrooper to carry about 100 rounds for a *Karabinier* (*Kar*) 98K rifle, enough to sustain him until further airdrops or reinforcements. Later in the war a variant bandolier with four large pockets was issued which provided a carrying capacity for four FG42 magazines.

Parachutes

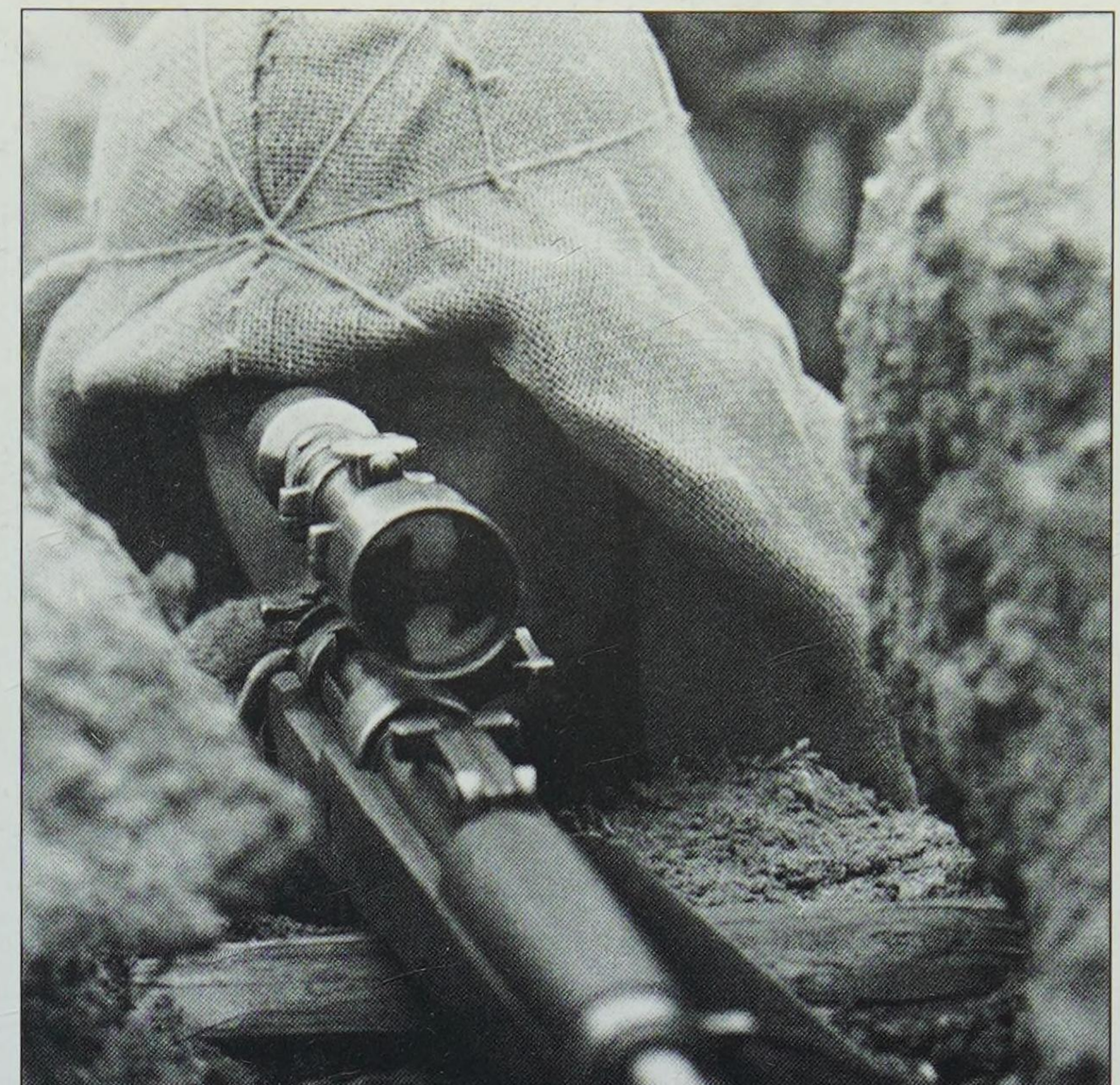
The static-line operated *Rückenpackung Zwangauslösung* 1 (RZ1) was the first parachute issued to the *Fallschirmjäger*. Developed by the Technical Equipment Division of the German Air Ministry

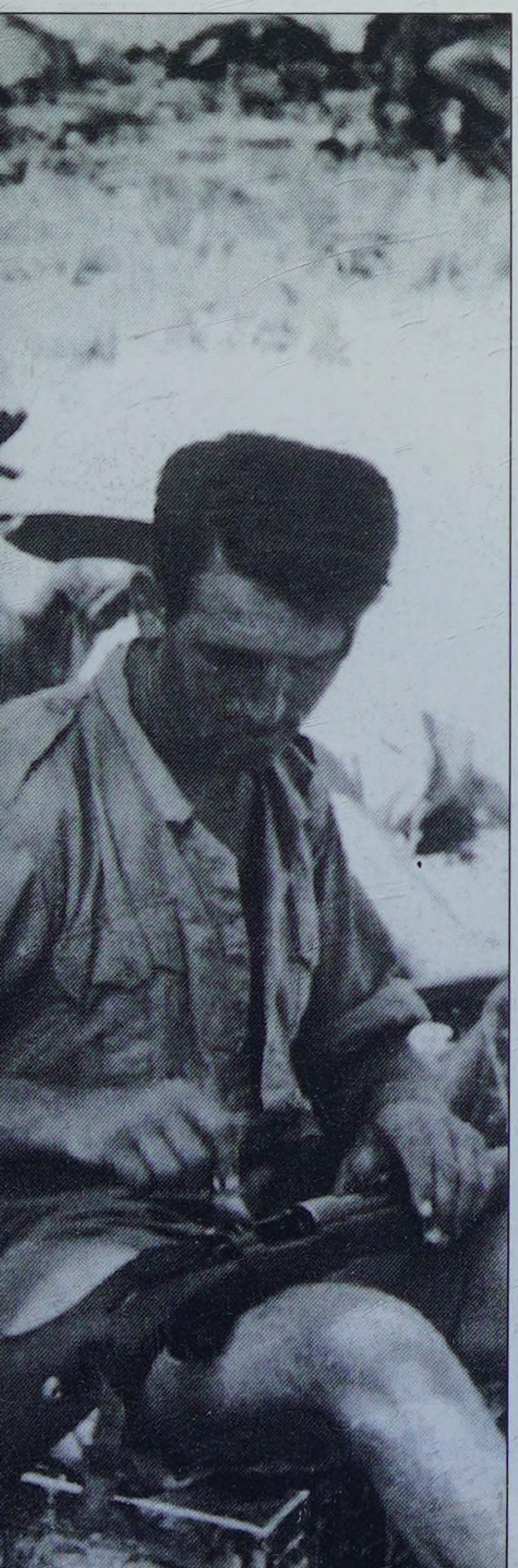
around 1937, the RZ1 had a 8.5m (28ft) diameter and an area of 56 square metres (600 sq ft). It was based on the Italian Salvatore design in which the shroud lines from the parachute came to a single point. From this point a V-shaped rope strop extended outwards and fastened to two D-rings on the paratrooper's waist belt. A troublesome consequence of this design was that the paratrooper hung from the straps in an awkward downward-facing diagonal – this also necessitated the headfirst dive from the aircraft in order to limit the impact of the parachute opening. This contrasted with the Irvin design used by the Allied paratroopers and *Luftwaffe* aviators that suspended the man vertically by virtue of four vertical straps. This design also gave some directional control over parachute flight, for by pulling on the 'lift webs' the user could alter the directional force of air under the canopy and 'push' himself in the right direction. The *Fallschirmjäger*, by contrast, could not even reach the straps behind them and so had no directional influence over the parachute.

A further disadvantage to the RZ1 was that it had four standard release buckles rather than the one quick-release buckle used by the Allies. This meant that paratroopers were often dragged along the ground by their 'chutes while frantically trying to undo all the buckles. In such situations it was often easier to simply cut your way out of the parachute. To do this every paratrooper from 1937 onwards had a special *kappmesser* ('gravity knife') stored in a specially designed pocket in the combat trousers. The blade was a enclosed within the handle, but opened by simply turning the handle downwards and depressing a blade catch, after which the knife swung into place by force of gravity. This meant that the knife could be employed easily using only one hand and it became an essential part of the paratrooper's kit.

After the RZ1 came the RZ16 in 1940 which featured a slightly modified harness and an improved static-line technology. However, it was the RZ20 issued from 1941 that became the dominant design throughout the rest of the war. One of its primary advantages was that it had a faster release buckle system, though it still maintained the essential problems of the Salvatore design. Another parachute, the RZ36, was produced later in the war but only saw very limited service in the Ardennes. The RZ36 was triangular in shape to help control the pendulum swing which had been so common with the parachutes to date.

The awkwardness of using the RZ-series cannot have helped but stem the effectiveness of parachute operations in the early years of war, especially as the injuries incurred during landing often severely reduced the numbers of men available for combat.





***Opposite, top:** Paratroopers man one of the best machine-guns of the twentieth century – the MG42. This powerful weapon could use a 50-round belt of 7.92mm ammunition at a rate of 1550rpm, with a muzzle velocity of 755m (2475ft) per second.*

***Above, right:** A paratrooper looks through the telescopic sights of his Mauser-designed 7.92mm* Karabiner *98K. The 98K was an accurate firearm which came in variants for airborne use, most notably a folding-stock version which took up less container space.*

***Left:** Weapons maintenance on Crete. The foreground soldier is cleaning an MG34 machine-gun, while the man in the centre is wiping down its tripod. Mounting it could provide a more stable base for prolonged ground fire.*

Above: *A* Fallschirmjäger *team operate a 50mm* Pak *38 anti-tank gun. The* Pak *38 was issued in late 1940. When it arrived on the Eastern Front in 1941, it proved itself one of the few weapons capable of penetrating the T-34's armour.*

Opposite, top: *A lone* Fallschirmjäger *stands over a* Pak *38 anti-tank gun in Russia. Its ability to punch through the T-34's 60mm (2.36in) armour came from its high muzzle velocity (823mps/2700fps) and the use of AP40 tungsten-cored rounds.*

Opposite, bottom: *A 105mm* leicht Geschütz *42 recoilless rifle is fired. Their low weight (alloy components kept them light for airborne use), and their capacity for being broken down into containers made the recoilless rifle a useful additional weapon.*

Below: *An anti-tank team load up a small-calibre gun in the Soviet Union. The expansion in the armoured contingents of Allied forces in both the east and west meant that anti-tank units became essential contingents of all paratrooper divisions.*

Containers

On parachute missions almost all supplies and weaponry would have to be air-dropped in *waffenhälter* ('containers'). Prior to Operation *Merkur* (Mercury) there were three sizes of container, the smaller being dedicated to heavy items like ammunition and the larger to bulkier but lighter supplies. After Crete these containers were standardised to a container 4.6m (15ft) long by 0.4m (16in) in diameter and with a 118kg (260lb) carrying capability. To protect the contents of the container, the impact side featured a corrugated iron pad which crushed on impact as a shock absorber. In addition, the contents were generally packed in rubber or felt pieces and held in place by support straps, or even suspended in another internal container.

For a platoon of 43 men, 14 containers would be needed. If not opened immediately on the drop zone, the containers could be transported using the four carrying handles or by running it on the small rubber-wheeled platform found in every container. One variation on the standard box was a bomb-shaped container used for lightweight supplies which were difficult to damage. This was dropped from aircraft like a conventional bomb, and though it was parachute-retarded the container had no impact-cushioning.

Firearms

The personal weapons of the *Fallschirmjäger* were generally standard *Wehrmacht* issue. Mauser rifles such as the 7.92mm *Gewehr* 98 and its update, the *Kar* 98K, were common paratrooper firearms, though both of these also came in airborne adaptations, either with folding stocks or shortened dimensions. The *Fallschirmjäger* also relied heavily on the classic 9mm MP40 machine-pistol – indeed a paratrooper unit would generally have greater numbers of these weapons than its infantry equivalent to boost the firepower of airborne deployments. Sidearms were the standard *Pistole* 08 (or Luger) and the 7.65mm Sauer M38H, the latter being especially popular with the *Fallschirmjäger*, while the MG34 and MG42 gave heavier infantry-support fire.

Nr. 82

A weapon that was unique to the paratroopers was the 7.92mm *Fallschirmjägergewher* 42 (FG42). The FG42 was developed at the specific request of the *Luftwaffe*, which was competing with the *Wehrmacht* in the early 1940s to produce an automatic rifle.

Rheinmetall was commissioned to design and produce a self-loading assault rifle specifically for the airborne soldiers, the result being the FG42 – an innovative and professional weapon. Distinctive features included a gas-operated mechanism, a 20-round side-mounted magazine and a plastic stock (later wood because of production problems). Capable of both semi- and full-automatic fire (at 750rpm), it could be used as an assault rifle and as a light infantry-support machine-gun, the latter function made possible by a permanently fitted bipod near the muzzle.

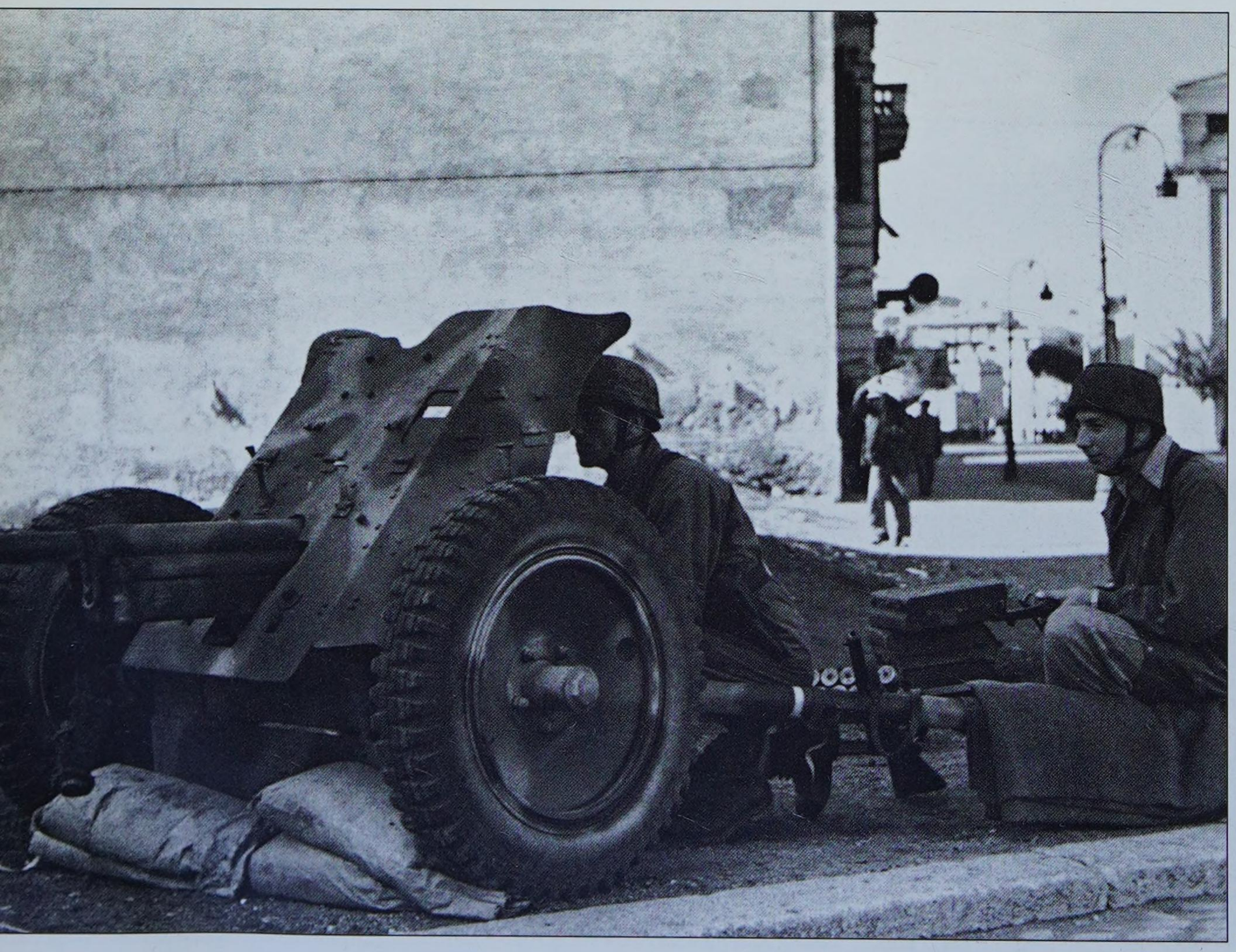
The FG42 set the scene for the modern assault rifle and demand for it from the *Fallschirmjäger* was high. However, the FG42 was a complex weapon to manufacture and it was never produced in sufficient numbers to become a major part of the *Fallschirmjäger* arsenal.

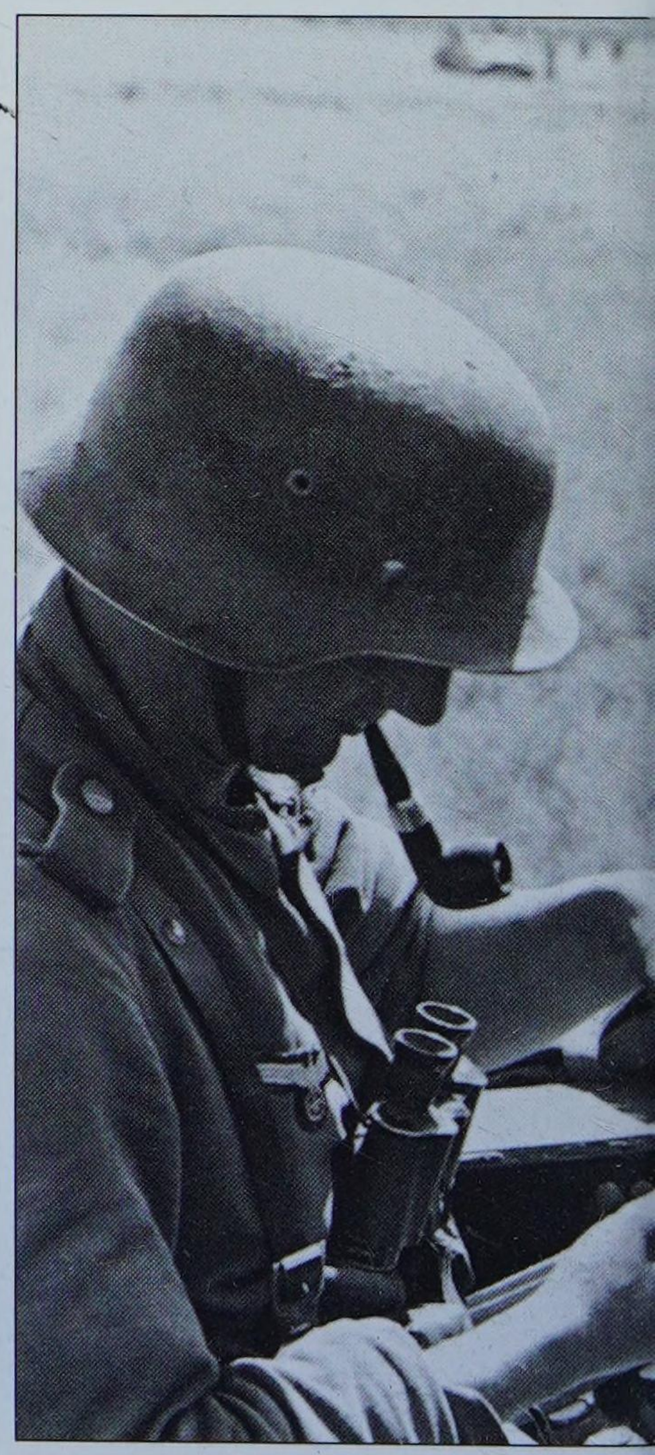
Support weapons and anti-tank guns

Although the weight restrictions of airborne operations meant that deploying heavy artillery was impossible, the *Fallschirmjäger* still had several varieties of support weapon at its disposal. These

Above: *A paratrooper mans twin-mounted MG34s configured for an anti-aircraft role. During the battles in the west such weapons systems formed a mobile though limited defence against Allied ground-attack aircraft.*

Below: **Fallschirmjäger** *cover a street with a 42mm* **Pak** *41. The* **Pak** *41 was primarily a longer-barrelled version of the earlier 37mm* **Pak** *36 which by 1941 lacked the penetration required to counter the new breed of Allied tanks.*





Below: *Paratroopers insert detonators into mortar rounds, arms perfectly suited to the unit's operational criteria – light, quickly deployed and capable of sustained bombardments. Their slim dimensions also made them suitable for parachute drops.*

Above: *A* Pak *38 team in action. The absence of a meaningful shield left the crew exposed to small arms fire, but it also gave the* Pak *38 an extremely low profile which was something useful when trying to avoid being targeted by enemy tanks.*

included small- and medium-calibre infantry-support artillery, anti-tank artillery, recoilless rifles and mortars. Of course, a whole range of standard *Wehrmacht* artillery pieces were used by paratrooper gunners throughout the war, but to meet the airborne demands new weapons were created or existing ones modified.

A prototype infantry artillery piece designed specifically for the paratroopers was the 7.5cm le IG18F (the 'F' standing for *Fallschirmjäger*). Developed in 1927 for general infantry use, the le IG18 was a light and squat artillery piece which could fire a high-explosive, smoke or hollow-charge shell up 7950m (26,100ft) depending on the charge selected. In 1937 a lighter version was produced for use by mountain troops and, extending the weight reduction, the 18F was produced in 1939. Like most *Fallschirmjäger* artillery pieces, the le IG18F could be broken down into four separate containers for parachute deployment. However, by the time it was ready to go into production lighter (but equally powerful) recoilless rifles had been developed and the le IG18F was not adopted.

One weapon which did see action was the 2cm *Geb Flak* 38. This useful gun functioned in both anti-aircraft and infantry-support roles. It was developed for parachute and mountain troops from the standard *Flak* 38, a Mauser-Werke improvement on Rheinmetall-Borsig's *Flak* 30. The *Geb Flak* 38's advantage for the

Above: *A 120mm mortar round is inserted into the barrel of a* Granatenwerfer *42. The shell's explosive force was considerable and had an impressive range of 6035m (1980ft). Such a weapon gave small units the power of conventional artillery.*

Left: Fallschirmjäger *fire the highly compact 50mm* leichte Granatwerfer *36. Although an ingenious design, the* leGrW *36 was expensive to produce and of limited military impact owing to its small round and limited range (around 500m/1640ft), and by 1941 it had been removed from production.*

paratroopers was that it had a high rate of fire (700–800rpm in practical circumstances), a lightweight and mobile two-wheel carriage, and its tubular legs could be folded to save space.

Of course, apart from the above weapons, mortars were a key element in the arsenal available to the paratroopers. Few models were actually for specific *Fallschirmjäger* use as they were already fairly convenient to deploy. However, the paratroopers' 81mm mortar did have a specially shortened barrel to enable it to be stored in a container. All paratrooper divisions featured mortar battalions and also anti-tank battalions.

It was particularly in the realm of anti-tank weapons that the *Fallschirmjäger* saw most innovation. Apart from the standard army weapons such as the 3.7cm *Pak* 36 (which could be broken down for an air drop), the paratroopers received a specific airborne variation of the 2.8cm *PzB* 41. This differed from army models in its lighter carriage, simple single-pole trail and small aircraft-type wheels. It also had no shield.

Below: *From a trench in southern Italy in 1944, two paratroopers prepare to fire their 81mm mortar. It could fire rounds from HE, smoke and illumination to a type which bounced back into the air on landing before exploding above ground.*

Right: *A paratrooper lies in wait with his* Flammenwerfer *41 flame-thrower. Two tanks are worn on the back: one for the inflammable liquid, the other for nitrogen gas used as a propellant. A single-burst – half a second – flame-thrower, the* Einstoss Flammenwerfer tragbar, *was also produced for the paratroopers, though it was not widely used for rather obvious reasons.*

Yet interest among the *Fallschirmjäger* moved away from conventional artillery to focus more on recoilless guns. Since the experiments with recoilless principles in World War I by US Navy Commander Cleland Davis, the Germans had been exploring how to create powerful but lightweight artillery pieces that used propellant gas vented at pressure through the rear of the weapon to balance the backward forces of the shell's recoil. Rheinmetall and Krupp started to master the system in the 1930s, and by the time the German paratroopers landed on Crete in 1941 they were taking with them these new weapons specifically designed for *Fallschirmjäger* use.

The first model used was the 7.5cm LG40 from Rheinmetall (Rheinmetall and Krupp had both submitted prototypes). It was made for paratrooper applications by being easily broken down into four parts for container deployment and its performance was respectable. It could fire a 5.83kg (13lb) projectile with anti-tank capability to a range of 6800m (22,300ft) and weighed only 145kg (320lb) as compared to the *PzB* 41's 229kg (505lb) operational weight.

Following the 7.5cm gun came 10.5cm versions by both Krupp and Rheinmetall-Borsig. The Krupp version, which was also known as the LG40, could be dropped in five separate parachute container loads or even pre-assembled in a shock-absorbing crate. Krupp made two variants of this weapon, the LG40-1 and the LG40-2, the former having light alloy mountings and the latter heavier steel mountings.

Rheinmetall-Borsig's 10.5cm weapon was the LG42 and proved to be the most successful 10.5cm version (if only in production quantities). It maintained the earlier Rheinmetall's virtue of deployment in four parachute loads and pushed the maximum range up to 7950m (26,100ft). Rheinmetall-Borsig followed the LG42 (and two variants of that weapon with metallurgical changes

Left: *A paratrooper loads an 88mm rocket into the back of his colleague's anti-tank* Raketenpanzerbüsche *54. The broad circular shield set near the front of the weapon was essential for the safety of the operator: the propulsion motor on the rocket would still be burning as it left the muzzle. This, combined with ferocious back blast, made many soldiers wary of using it, yet it was undeniably effective against almost all Allied tanks.*

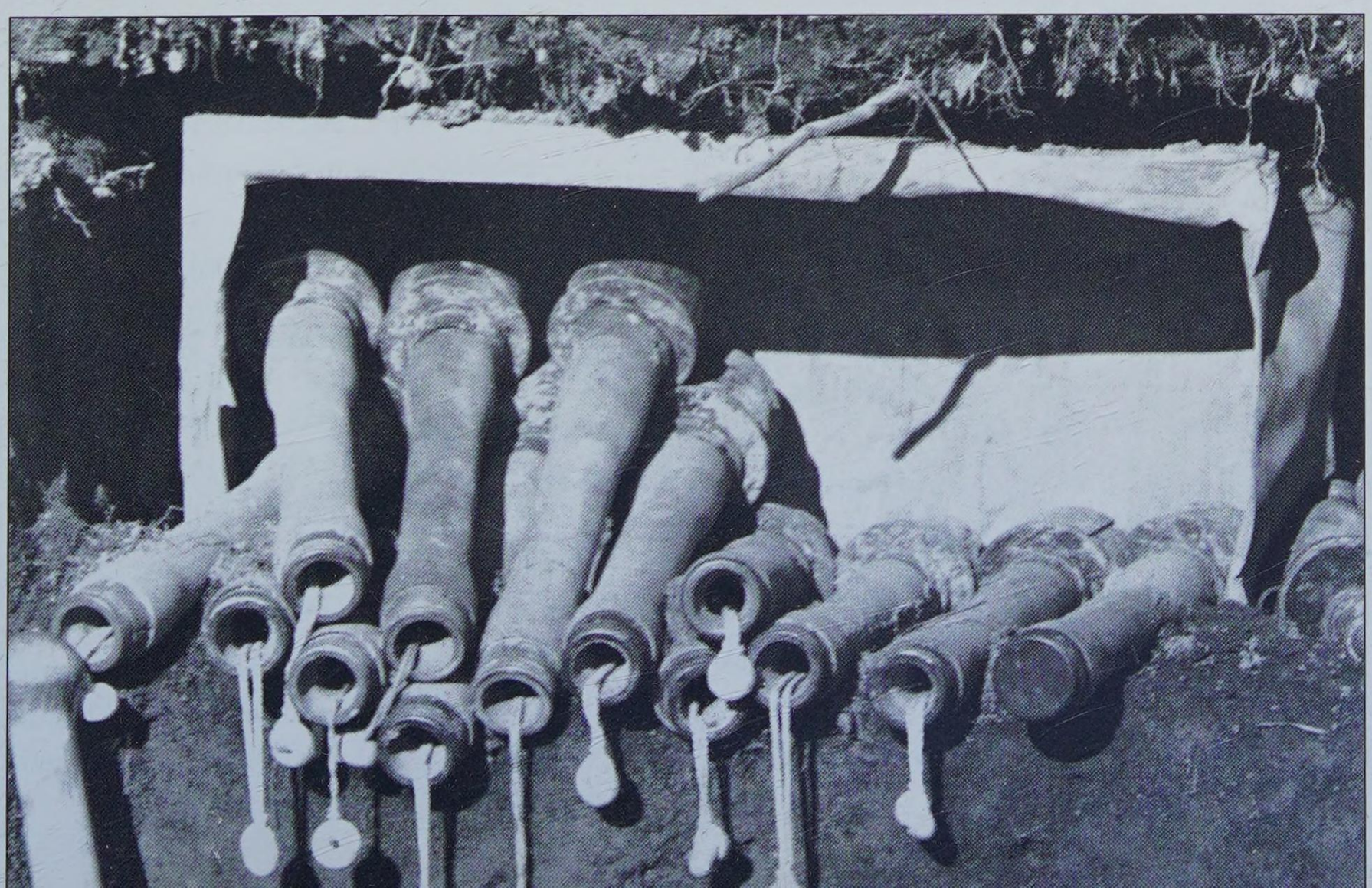
Right: *A vehicle is stacked up with* Raketenpanzerbüsche *54 anti-tank rocket launchers, nicknamed* Panzerschreck *('tank terror'). These easily concealed weapons placed an acute strain on Allied tank commanders in the west. With a working range of up to 180m (600ft), the user of the* Panzerschreck *could attack traffic on the roads, streets and fields with effective armour-piercing firepower.*

to the carriage) with the LG43. This again used the same 10.5cm calibre ammunition as the LG43 but was slightly shorter and lighter. However, it featured a quite conventional trail design and doubled the amount of parachute loads the LG42 required. Whether for this reason or not, few of the LG43s were produced.

Recoilless guns were used especially during the invasion of Crete and in the Italian campaign, but they had their faults. The gas propelled from the back of the gun posed a considerable danger to the users (a distance of at least 50m/164ft was recommended for safety), and the backblast of stones, dust and leaves gave a clear indication to the enemy of the operator's position. They also required a lot of propellant to work, something which was in increasingly short supply as the war on, and by 1944 recoilless guns had been taken out of production.

The paratroopers had other anti-tank weapons to draw on. The hand-held rocket launchers such as the *Panzerfaust* and the *Raketenpanzerbüsche* were particularly feared by the Allied tank commanders. The one-shot *Panzerfaust* 30, for instance, could put a hollow-charge grenade through 200mm (8in) of tank armour at about 30m (100ft), the subsequent *Panzerfaust* 60 and *Panzerfaust* 100 improving on the range. The 8.8cm *Raketenpanzerbüsche* (*RPzB*) was the German version of the formidable bazooka utilised by the Americans and effectively superseded the 8.8cm *Püppchen* rocket launcher which was constructed as an artillery piece in miniature. In its later version, the *RPzB*54, it had a range of up to 180m (590ft).

The paratroopers used such rocket launchers, and indeed all their weapons, to good effect throughout the war. The very nature of glider and parachute deployment produced some distinct innovations or variations in weaponry, though as the paratroopers became increasingly consigned to ground operations such experimentation naturally became more limited.



Left: *Ranks of* Stielgranate *stick grenades are lined up at the ready, protective caps removed and fuse cords exposed. The common stick grenade was used to good effect by all German soldiers, not only in an anti-personnel capacity but also against armour. By binding several handleless grenades around one which retained its handle, a powerful explosive device could be used against tank tracks and engine compartments.*

Bibliography

Bando, Mark A. *The 101st Airborne at Normandy*. Motorbooks International: Osceola, Wisconsin: 1994

Barr, Niall and Hart, Russell. (eds.), *Panzer: The Illustrated History of German Armour in WWII*. Aurum: London, 1999

Belfield, Eversley. *The Battle for Normandy*. Pan Books: London, 1983

Bishop, Chris. (ed.) *WWII: The Directory of Weapons*. Greenwich Editions: London, 1998

Blandford, Edmund L. *Green Devils, Red Devils : Untold Tales of the Airborne Forces in the Second World War*. Leo Cooper: London, 1993

Chamberlain, Peter. *Afrika Korps : German Military Operations in the Western Desert, 1941-42*. Almark Publishing Co. Ltd.: Edgeware, 1971

Crookenden, Sir Napier. *Dropzone Normandy : The Story of the American and British Airborne Assault on D-Day 1944*. Ian Allan: London, 1976

Davies, Brian L. *German Parachute Forces 1939–45*. Arms and Armour Press: London, 1974

Davis, Brian L. *US Airborne Forces Europe 1942–45*. Arms and Armour Press: London, 1974

De Ste. Croix, Philip. (et. al.), *Airborne Operations*. Salamander Books: London, 1978

Deichmann, Paul. *Spearhead for Blitzkrieg: Luftwaffe operations in support of the army 1939–1945*. Greenhill: London, 1996

Devlin, Gerard M. *Paratrooper! : The Saga of Parachute and Glider Combat Troops during World War II*. Robson: London, 1979

Glantz, David M. *The History of Soviet Airborne Forces*. F. Cass: Ilford, 1994

Hetherington, John. *Airborne Invasion: The Story of the Battle of Crete*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd.: London, 1944

Hogg, Ian V. *Fortress A History of Military Defence*. Purnell: London, 1975

Hogg, Ian V. *German Artillery of World War II*. Greenhill: London, 1997

Keegan, John. *The Second World War*. Pimlico: London, 1997

Kemp, Anthony. *D-Day the Normandy Landings and the Liberation of Europe*. Thames and Hudson: London,1994

Kuhn, Volkmar. *German Paratroops in World War II*, trans. by H.A. Barker and A.J. Barker. Motorbuch Verlag, Germany, and Ian Allan: London, 1978

Lucas, James. *Storming Eagles: German Airborne Forces in World War II*. Arms and Armour Press: London, 1988

Lucas, James. *War on the Eastern Front, 1941-1945: The German Soldier in Russia*. Janes Publishing Company: London, 1979

Lucas, John. *The Silken Canopy : A History of the Parachute*. Airlife: Shrewsbury, 1997

Mayer, S.L. (ed.) Signal *Hitlers Wartime Magazine*. Bison: London, 1976

Nasse, Jean Yves. *Green Devils German Paratroops 1939–1945*. Histoire and Collections: Paris, 1997

Perrett, Bryan. *Lightning War: A History of Blitzkrieg*. Hale: London, 1983

Quarrie, Bruce and Chappell, Mike. *German Airborne Troops 1939–45*. Osprey Publishing: London, 1983

Quarrie, Bruce. *Airborne Assault: Parachute Forces in Action 1940–91*. Patrick Stephens: Sparkford, 1991

Rauss, Erhard. *Fighting in Hell: German ordeal on the Eastern front*. London, Greenhill: London, 1995

Shtemenko, S.M. *The Last Six Months : Russia's Final Battles with Hitler's Armies in World War II*. Kimber: London, 1978

Vigor, P.H. *Soviet Blitzkrieg Theory*. Macmillan: London, 1983

Westwood, J.N. *Eastern Front: the Soviet-German War 1941–45*. Hamlyn: London, 1984

Whiting, Charles. *Hunters from the Sky: The History of the German Parachute Regiment 1940–1945*. Leo Cooper: London, 1975

INDEX

References in *italic* refer to captions

A

7th Air Division 15, 93, 96, 99, 100
  in Berlin 16, *16*
  renamed 107
Airborne army 102
airborne assault 7
Airborne infantry *60*
aircraft
  Curtiss F8C Helldiver ground-attack aircraft 9
  Dornier Do-23 31
  Fiesler Storch 146, 151
  Hawker Typhoon 130, *131*
  Heinkel He-111 30, *31*
  Hurricane 130
  Junkers Ju 52 12, 16, *27, 28, 29*, 30, *60, 157*
    in Belgium 136
    crashed in the Netherlands *52*
    in Norway 42, *43*
    over Crete *57, 62, 63*
    over the Netherlands *39, 50*
    overflying Tunisia *75*
  Junkers Ju-87 stuka dive bomber 10
    over Stalingrad *98*
  Junkers Ju-88 *42*
  Lockheed P-38 Lightning *131*
  P-51 Mustang *131*
  see also gliders
22nd Airlanding Division 52, 54, 55, 60
  combined with 7th Air Division 57
Alam el Halfa, battle (Six-Day Race) 76
Albert Canal 47
Alexander, General 108, 117, *124*
Algeria 85
Allied airborne forces *136*
Allied Ghurka and Indian units, in North Africa 76
Altmann, Hauptmann *45*
anti-aircraft units *139*
anti-tank units *99, 103, 164*
  France *129*
  Russia *94*
  Sicily 110
Anzio 15, *108*
Anzio-Nettuno front *114, 115*
Ardennes campaign 135–42
armaments *see* weapons
Armed Forces High Command (OKW) 15
armoured assault 9
18th Army 54
21st Army Group 129
Army Group Centre 96, 104
Army Group North 93, 96
Arnhem 133, *137*
Assault Group Koch 47, 48
'assault troops' 9
Australian 9th division 78
Australian soldiers, on Crete 70

B

Badoglio, Marshal 111, 146
Bagration *105*
Barethin, Oberst Walther 81
Barethin-Regiment 81
Bassenge, Major 12
1st Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment 13, 15
Battle of the Bulge *141*
Battle Group Gericke 115
Battle Group Meindl 96, 99
Battle of Kursk (Operation Citadel) 100
Becker, Oberleutnant K.H. *61*
Belgium, invasion 47–50
Berlepsche, Oberleutnant Georg von 150
Bletchley Park 61
Bonin, Oberst von 110
Brandis, Leutnant von 42
Bräuer, Oberst Bruno 12, 13, *55*
Brest 127, 131–3
British airborne forces
  North Africa 82
  Sicily 110
British Army, Experimental Armoured Force (EAF) 9
78th British division 121
British Parachute Regiment *67*, 85
Brittany 131
Burckhardt, Major 75

C

Caen 128–9
cameramen *128*
camouflage *128, 130, 145*
  splinter pattern *19*
Canea, Crete 64, *65*, 70, 71
Churchill, Winston *67*
Clark, Major General Mark W. 81, 114
Cornith Canal *58, 59*
Crete 57–73, *57, 61*
  Battle Group Centre 60
  Battle Group East 61
  Battle Group West 60, 63
  Canea 64, *65*, 70, 71
  casualties 59, 63, 64, 67, 68, 72, *73*
  Heraklion 67, 68, 71–72
  partisans *67*
  Suda Bay *64*
  weapons maintenance *163*
Crimea *101*

D

Delica, Oberleutnant *45*, 49
Denmark
  invasion 41–7
  landing of British airborne forces *143*
Depienne 85
Dordrecht bridge 52

E

'Eagles', foundation 12
Eastern Front 91–105, *93, 101*
  casualties 96, 105
  winter conditions *95*
Eban Emael *44, 47, 48, 49*
  attack on 49–50
Eighth Army 85, 108, 113
Eisenhower, Lieutenant General Dwight D. 81, 130
El Alamein *76*, 77, 78
elite status, of paratroopers 19
Empire Expeditionary Force 59
equipment 157–71, *157*
  ammunition bandolier *159*, 161
  containers *10, 160, 164*
  parachutes 161–4
    backpack parachute, invention 8
    fitting *159*
    folding *34*
    jump position *19*
    parachute jump *10*
    ripcord operation *28*
    RZ1 *22*, 29, 161, 163
    RZ16 163
    RZ20 *159*, 163
    RZ36 163
    static line *27, 28, 29*
  see also uniform
expansion of parachute regiments 75
Experimental Armoured Force (EAF), British Army 9

F

Falaise 130
Fallschirmjäger *see* German paratroopers

Fascist Grand Council 111
First Paratroop Army 127, 129, 133, 142
1 FJD 107, 113
2 FJD *83*, 100, 104, 107, 111, 127, 130, 131, 132, 143, 146
3 FJD 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 133, 142, 143
5 FJD 127, 128, 129, 133, 142
6 FJD 142
7 FJD 140
9 FJD 102, 103
8 FJD 142
10 FJD 105
FJR 1 123
FJR 2 59, 96, 101–102
FJR 3 119, 135
FJR 4 110, 123
FJR 5 81, 83, 85, *88*, 104, 135, 147
FJR 6 128, 133, 146
FJR 8 136
FJR 9 129, 136
  commandeered by SS *135*, 136
FJR 14 130
FJR 16 102
7th Flieger Division 7
France *136, 137*
  German retreat *132*
  see also Western Front
French Expeditionary Corps 115
Freyberg, Major General 60, 67, 117
Friedenthal Hunting Groups 149

G

Garnerin, Andre-Jacques 8
Gazala Line 76
Genz, Oberleutnant Alfred *61*
Gericke, Hauptmann 42, 146–7, 148
German Air Ministry, Technical Equipment Division 161
German airborne regiments 127
German army, parachute unit 12–13
German paratroopers
  of army and air force amalgamated 15
  change in role *101*
  origin 8–12
  paratroop company Sauer 81
  paratroop corps, foundation 12
  public demonstration *7*
German Paratroops in World War II, Volkmar Kuhn 37
German retreat
  through Copenhagen *143*
  through France *132*
Germany, fall of 142–3
GJR 100 (mountain troops) 68
gliders
  Gotha DFS-230 glider 16, *37*, 59, *60*, 157
    crashed on Crete *64*
  in rescue of Mussolini 150-51
  US Waco CG-4A Hadrian glider *136*
  vulnerability 73
Göring, Herman 12, *55*
Graf von Schlieffen, General Alfred 8
Gran Sasso *147*, 148-52, *149, 150*
  Albergo-Rifugio Campo Imperatore complex 150, *151*
Greece, attack on 59
Guderian, Heinz 9
Gustav Line 113, 123
Guzzoni, General 108

H

Hagel, Oberleutnant *61*
The Hague 52
Heavy Parachute Infantry Company 12–13
Heidrich, General Richard 13, 15, *111*, 119
Heinke, Otto 8
Heraklion, Crete 67, 68, 71–2, 73
Heydte, Major von der *111*, 127, 128, 135
  surrender at Monschau 136
Hitler, Adolf 16, *39*, 138
  and Mussolini 148, *153*
Hitler Youth 21
Hitler/Dora Line *123*

I

4th Indian Division 117, 121
'indirect assault' 8
47th Infantry Brigade 52
22nd Infantry Division 13
Iron Cross 42, *86*
  see also Knight's Cross
Italian campaign 111–13
Italian Folgore Brigade 78
Italian paratroopers *108*
Italy 107–25, *107*, 146
  Allied invasion 113
  paratroopers 8
  winter conditions *113*
  see also Monte Cassino; Sicily

J

Jäger, Stabsarzt Dr *45*
Jebel Abiod 82

K

Kershin, Oberstleutnant 55
Kesselring, General Feldmarschall 81, 110, 113, 148
Kies, Hauptmann *45*
Kluge 129
Knight's Cross *45*, 54, 61, 79, 152
Koch, Hauptmann *39*, 47, 57, 63, 75
Koniev, Marshal 102
Kos 152
Kreysing, Oberst 55
Krupp 158, 170
Kuhn, Volkmar, *German Paratroops in World War II* 37

L

Leningrad 93–4, 96, *96*
Leros 152
Leroux, Charles 8
Lithuania *105*
Luftwaffe, training 21
Luftwaffe Paratroop Training School 12
Lupo (Italian destroyer) 68

M

Maleme airfield 63, 67, 68, 70
Manstein, Feldmarschal Erich von *101*
medical companies *139*
Medjez 83
Meindl, Generalmajor 60, 63, 96
Meissner, Oberleutnant *45*
Messina 110
Middleton, General 132
Milch, Erhard 12
Mitchell, Brigadier General William ('Billy') 7–8, *8*
Moerdijk bridge 52, *52, 54*
Monte Cassino *107, 110, 111*, 113-23, *113, 121*
  casualties 121
  lack of heavy weaponry *112*
  leaflet drop by Allies *115, 116*
  monastery *114, 115, 116*, 117, *118, 120*
Monte Rotondo 146–8
Montgomery, Lieutenant General 77, 78, 85, 108, 109, 113, 133
  in France 129
Mororzov, General 96
Mors, Major 150, 151
motorbikes
  in France *133*
  in Italy *113*
  in Normandy *127*
  in North Africa *83, 85*
5th Mountain division 60
Munich agreement 16
Mussolini 111, *146, 153*
  rescue on the Gran Sasso 145-53

N

Naples 113
National Socialist German Workers Party 21
Nazi flag, as marker for aircraft *94*
Nazi–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact 91
Netherlands 133–5
  invasion 50–55, *50, 51*
2nd New Zealand Division 117, 121
New Zealand infantry 113
Normandy 127, 128–3, *132*
  Allied landings 128
North Africa 75–89
  casualties 79, 88
  water rationing *77*
  winter conditions *81*
Norway *31, 40, 41, 42, 43*
  invasion 41–7

O

Operation
  Barbarossa 92, 93
  Citadel (Battle of Kursk) 100
  Cobra 130
  Epson 129
  Goodwood 129
  Grenade 135
  Husky 108
  Knight's Move 154
  Koltso (Ring) *99*
  Lightfoot (Battle of El Alamein) 78
  Market Garden 133
  Mercury (Merkur) 57–73
  North Wind 140
  Oak *145*
  Overlord 107, 128, 133
  Ox Head 85
  Pulawy 39
  Sealion 55
  Supercharge 78
  Torch 81–4
  Typhoon 91
  Veritable 135, 140

P

Pabst, Hauptmann Heinrich 37
Panther Group 155–6
9th Panzer Division 52
1st Parachute Division *111*
1st Parachute Rifle Battalion 12
parachute unit, of German army 12–13
parachutes *see under* equipment
partisans, on Crete *67*
Patton, General 108
Paulus, General Friedrich 99
Paulus, Käthe 8
Peiper, Joachim 135, 136
Peterson, Generalmajor 96
Ploesti oilfields, Romania 60
Poland, invasion 39
Police Detachment Wecke 12
Polish soldiers, at Monte Cassino *123*
Prager, Hauptmann 55
Primsalo bridge 110
prisoners of war
  British prisoners of war
    Crete *59, 67*
    Depienne *86*
    North Africa *85*
  Dutch prisoners of war *55*
  German prisoners of war *124, 125, 135*
    France *133*
  US prisoners of war, in the Ardennes *141*

Q

qualities of paratroopers 36–37

R

Ramcke, Generalmajor 75, 77, 78, 79, 107, 127, 131
  in France 132
recruitment 19–37
Red Army 93, 96
Reduit National 47
Regiment Herman Göring 12
Reichswald, casualties 140
Rheinmetall 158, 166, 170
Ringel, Generalmajor *45*, 60
River
  Bug 39, 104
  Dnieper 100
  Dniester 104
  Maas 47
  Simeto 109
  Veva 93
  Vistula 29
Romania, Ploesti oilfields 60
Rome 111, *111*, 113, 146
  retreat to 123–5
Rommel, General 75, 77, 78
Rotterdam 52
Royal navy, at Crete 70
rubber inflatable boats *47*
Ruhr pocket 143
Runstedt von 138
Russia *91*, 92–5, *100, 102, 105*
  winter conditions *103*
Russian paratroopers 8, *9*
Rybaka, SS-Hauptsturmführer Kurt 154

S

Sagitaro (Italian destroyer) 68
St Lô 129-30
St Malmo 132
Salerno *109*
Sauer, Hauptmann *78*
Schimpf, Generaleutnant 127
Schmidt, Leutnant Herbert 45
Schram, Leutnant Bruno 15
Schulz, Oberleutnant Lothar 25
SdKfz 222 armoured car *111*
selection of recruits 22
Sicily
  casualties 110
  invasion 108–11
Siegfried Line 135
Signal 25, 151
ski-troopers *93, 97*
Skorzeny, SS-Obersturmführer Otto 145, *146*, 149, 150, *150*, 151, 152
Slater, Lt Col 110
Soletti, General *146*
South African 1st division 78
specialist operations 145–5
Sponek, General von 15
SS Fallschirmjäger Battalion 152, *154, 155*
SS units *135*
Stalingrad *98*, 99, *99*
Student, Generalmajor Kurt *14, 19*, 36, 39, 60, 72, 129, 133
  on Crete *65*
  and Mussolini rescue 146, 148, 149, 150
Sturm, Oberst 95
Suda Bay, Crete *64*
Sudetenland 16
Süssman, Generalmajor 60, 64

T

tanks 8
  in the Ardennes 138
  at Monte Cassino 121
  Churchill tanks 110
  in France 130
  in North Africa *82*
  Panzer Mk III tank *98*
  Panzerspähwagen FdKfz 233 *82*
  in Russia 93, *98, 105*
  Semovente L.40 da47/32 *82*
  in Sicily 110
  Tiger tank *105*
Tietjen, Leutnant 54
Timoshenko, Marshal 99
Tito, Marshal (Josip Broz) 145, 152–5, *152*
Toschka, Oberleutnant *61*
training 19–37
  award procedure 35

descent 32
directional control, during training *20*
jump platform *23, 25*
jump position *32*
jump training 28–35, *30*
landing *21, 32*, 34, *34*
training line-up *15*
trench warfare, Russia *97*
Tunisia *75, 78, 79, 81, 85*
50th Tyne Tees Division 78, 110

U

Udet, Leutnant Ernst *8*, 9–10
Ukraine 100
ULTRA intelligence 61, 132
uniform *10*, 158–161, *158*
footwear *34*, 159
helmet *158*, 160
NCO *36*
protective clothing 159–60
winter uniform *91, 92*
US 82nd Airborne division 133

V

Valkenburg 52
Vatutin, General 102
Versailles Treaty 21
Vichy French territories 81
Vlasov, General Andrei 96
volunteers 20
vulnerability of airborne troops 73

W

Waalhaven 52
Walther, Hauptmann 40, 42
water rationing, North Africa *77*
Wavell, Colonel Archibald 8
weapons 157–71
anti-aircraft guns
Flak 38 anti-aircraft gun *141*
Flakvierling anti-aircraft gun 82, *131*
anti-tank guns *73, 86*, 166–71
Pak 36 anti-tank gun *103, 166*, 169
Pak 38 anti-tank gun *164, 167*
Pak 41 anti-tank gun *166*
Panzerbüsche 39 anti-tank rifle *157*
Panzerfaust anti-tank rocket launcher *142, 158*, 171
PzB 41, anti-tank gun 169
Raketenpanzerbüsche (Panzerschreck) anti-tank rocket launcher *129, 170, 171*
firearms 164-6
FG42 assault rifle *120, 145*
FG43 assault rifle 166
Luger pistol 164
Luger PO8 pistol *159*
Mauser Kar 98K rifle *97, 139, 163*, 164
Mauser rifles 164
MG34 machine gun *76, 88, 163*, 164, *166*
MG42 machine gun *143*, 164
MG43 machine gun *163*
MP28 submachine gun *128*
MP38 pistol *12, 71, 160*
MP40 machine-pistol *58, 67, 95, 159*, 164
Sauer M38H pistol *159*, 164
US Browning machine gun *127*
flamethrowers
Einstoss Flammenwerfer tagbar flamethrower *170*
Flammenwerfer 41 flamethrower *170*
grenades
stick grenade *97*
Stilgranate stick grenade *171*
mines, Teller anti-tank mines *109*
mortars 167, 169, *169*
rockets *170*
support weapons 166–71
field gun *130*
Flugabwehrkanone 103/38 *139*
Geb Flak 38 167, 169
Geschütz 42 recoiless rifle *164*
le IGI8F artillery piece 167
leGrW 36 *169*
LG40 recoilless gun 170
LG42 recoilless gun 170
LG43 recoilless gun 171
recoilless guns 170–171
recoilless rifles *73*
weapons container *160*
weapons maintenance, Crete *163*
Wecke, Police Major 12
Weidling, Generalleutnant Karl 105
Western Front 127–143
wounded troops *139*
Wilke, Generalleutnant 127
winter conditions
Eastern Front *95*
Italy *113*
Russia *103*
Witzig , Hauptmann *39, 45*, 47, 81, 82, 88, 102
World War I 8, 9
wounded troops, Western Front *139*

Y

Yugoslavia 145, 152

Z

Zahn, Oberleutnant 13
Zhitomir 101
Zierach, Hauptmann 45
Zimmerit anti-magnetic mine paste *105*

PICTURE CREDITS

Bundesarchiv, Bild: 1, 17, 18, 23, 25, 27 (t), 31 (both), 77, 79, 82–83 (t&b), 84 (b), 85 (b), 86 (t), 87 (t), 88 (l), 91, 93 (r), 94–95 (all), 96–97, 98–99, 100 (l), 101 (b), 102 (both), 103 (both), 104 (tl), 105 (t), 109 (b), 126, 127, 128–129 (all), 130–131 (all), 132 (both), 133 (b), 136–137 (all), 138–139 (all), 141 (t & b), 142, 143 (t), 144, 148–149, 156, 157, 162 (t), 163 (r), 164 (t), 165 (both), 166 (b), 166–167 (b), 167 (t), 168, 169 (t), 170 (both), 171 (b). **The Robert Hunt Library**: 15, 22 (both), 26–27, 28 (bl), 30 (t), 37, 47 (b), 49 (t), 50 (t), 51 (t) (IWM), 53 (t), 61 (t), 62 (bl), 67 (t), 68–69, 75, 84–85, 87 (b), 100–101, 108, 112–113, 115, 116 (b), 118–119 (all), 120 (t), 122–123, 151, 158 (b). **Salamander Picture Library**: 43 (bl & br), 44 (t), 50 (b), 58 (tr & tl), 64 (t), 67 (b), 69 (t), 92 (b), 114 (b), 114 –115, 140 –141, 143 (b), 159 (b). **TRH Pictures**: 2, 8, 9 (both), 10 (r), 11 (both), 12, 20 (t), 21, 24–25, 32–33 (all), 34 (all), 35, 36, 40 (IWM), 44 (b), 45 (b), 47 (m), 51 (b) (IWM), 52 (t), 56 (IWM), 58, 59, 60, 62 (br), 63 (all), 64 (b) (IWM), 65 (b), 66, 70 (b) (IWM), 76, 82 (m), 90, 92 (t), 93 (l), 96 (b), 97 (t & m & b), 104 (tr), 104–105, 106 (IWM), 109 (t), 110, 111 (both), 114 (t), 116 (tl & tr), 117 (tl & tr), 121 (IWM), 123 (t), 124, 125, 133 (t), 134–135, 135, 145, 155, 158 (t), 160 (t), 160–161, 164 (b), 166–167 (t), 169 (b), 171 (t). **Suddeutscher Verlag, Bilderdienst**: 6, 7, 10 (l), 13, 14, 16–17, 20 (b), 26 (t), 28 (tl & r), 29, 30 (b), 38, 39, 40 (tl & b), 41, 42 (both), 43 (t), 45 (t), 46, 47 (t), 48, 49 (b), 52 (b), 53 (b), 54 (both), 55 (both), 57, 61 (b), 62 (t), 65 (t), 67 (m), 68 (tl), 69 (b), 70 (t), 71 (both), 72, 73 (both), 74, 78, 80–81 (both), 83 (m), 88–89, 107, 112 (t & bl), 113 (t), 117 (b), 120 (b), 159 (t), 160 (b), 162–162.

DISCARDED
From Niagara Falls Public Library

940.544943 McNa

German paratroopers.
McNab, C.

PRICE: $24.37 (ONF/an/v)

(continued from front flap)

Their appalling casualty rate is testament both to the part that they played in assisting other units in the tightest of situations, and to their unfaltering commitment to their uni and comrades. Time after time they were severely debilitated by casualtie yet repeatedly they reformed, and were among the last German units st fighting as the Allies closed in on Berlin. It is a story of heroism almost beyond the call of duty, related here through the 200-plus photographs of their many battle actions, comple-mented by an authoritative text written by a military historian of Wor War II.

Dr Chris McNab is a freelance writer, editor and researcher who specialises in twentieth-century military history. He has a PhD from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, and is the author of *Modern Military Uniforms* and co-author of the *Illustrated History of Vietnam*. He currently lives in South Wales.

Editorial and design by
Amber Books Ltd
Bradley's Close
74-77 White Lion Street
London N1 9PF

Jacket illustrations: Bilderdienst
Suddeutscher Verlag, Robert Hunt
Library and TRH Pictures

Printed in Italy

Aurum Press Ltd
25 Bedford Avenue
London WC1B 3AT

NIAGARA FALLS PUBLIC LIBRARY
[redacted]
3 8080 00324483 5

Includes more than 200 photographs showing many of the combat actions of German paratroopers during World War II

Detailed captions and informative text describe where and when these elite units fought in the war

Contains dramatic accounts of the many daring missions mounted, such as the capture of the fortress of Eben Emael and the breathtakingly audacious mountain-top rescue of Mussolini on Gran Sasso

W9-CHA-708

ISBN 1-85410-726-7
9 781854 107268